

Introduction. What is Social Theory?

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Social theory can be defined as the study of scientific ways of thinking about social life. It encompasses ideas about how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behaviour, about power and social structure, class, gender and ethnicity, modernity and 'civilization', revolutions and utopias, and numerous other concepts and problems in social life. This Introduction addresses some of the leading questions that arise when we start to think about the very idea of a 'science of society'. We begin by discussing the meaning of the word 'theory' and its various implications for 'method' and 'methodology' in social research. We also consider questions about the relationship of social theory to 'common sense', about the role of 'facts', 'values', and 'objectivity' in social research, and about the relation of sociology to other disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities such as political theory, psychology, anthropology, history, and philosophy.

The meaning of 'theory'

As a term of art, 'social theory' is a distinctly recent invention. No such term exists in English or in any other language before the twentieth century, and even in the twentieth century it is not common before about the 1940s. Auguste Comte coined the term *sociologie* in France in the 1840s, but 'sociology' too did not gain widespread currency as a term until after 1900. However, the two separate words 'social' and 'theory' are very ancient in origin. An initial look at their etymologies will give us some clues to their meaning as a conjoined pair.

Our words 'social' and 'society' derive from the Latin words *socius* and *societas*. For the Romans, a *socius* was a member of a trading partnership. A *socius* was a merchant cooperating with other merchants as a partner, fellow, or 'associate'. A partnership or 'association' between merchants was a *societas*, which is the origin of our modern English word 'company' or 'business firm', as well as our keyword *society*. The commercial meaning of *societas* is directly preserved in other modern European languages such as in the French and Italian *société* and *società* and the German *Gesellschaft*. In this sense we can say that sociology and social theory are concerned with relations of 'sociation' between 'members' or 'partners', including not only business partners but a great many other kinds and processes of 'sociation' and 'socialization' between individuals.

Our modern word 'theory' derives from the ancient Greek word *theōria*. *Theōria* for the Greeks meant 'contemplation'. In the writings of the philosopher Aristotle, *theōria* referred to contemplation of the cosmos. It contrasted with *praxis*, from which our word 'practice' derives. *Praxis* for the Greeks referred to human beings' way of acting and conducting their lives on this earth, in the immediate everyday world. Clearly, this ancient Greek understanding of *theōria* differs from most common uses of the word 'theory' today. The Greek word *theōria* had a different set of connotations from most modern linkages of theory with 'scientific construction'. Today we tend to think of 'a theory' as being a 'scientific construct' or a 'scientific model'. In contrast, *theōria* for the Greeks did not itself mean science. Rather, it meant *reflection* on science: reflection on the value of science, as one mode of contemplating the cosmos among others—alongside art, myth, religion, and the most general discipline of thinking that the Greeks called 'philosophy', or 'love of wisdom'.

The ancient Greek meaning of *theōria* might not seem particularly relevant to us in the present day. It might seem to reinforce the rather widespread view that theory lacks relevance to daily life. Yet this would be to fail to appreciate the significance of the idea. *Theōria* for the Greeks was an indispensable aid to making sense of their lives in the ordinary world of society, in the world of the 'city' or what they called the *polis*, from which our word 'politics' derives. They believed that people who did not pause to engage in contemplation and reflection had no points of orientation for conducting their lives in practice, in the political world of actions and interactions with other people. Thus *theōria* for the Greeks remained indispensable to everyone who sought wisdom, happiness, and the good life in the realm of *praxis*.

It can be said that a recurrent tendency of modern times has been for theory to be equated with scientific knowledge per se and to lose its original additional connotation of critical reflective questioning about the *value* and *meaning* of science—in the context of

politics, in the context of other modes of understanding, and in the context of the finitude and mortality of human life. The neglect of *theōria* in modern times was a particularly important concern for the Jewish-German philosopher Edmund Husserl, founder of the movement of philosophical thought known as *phenomenology*. Writing in the 1930s, Husserl argued that unless the sciences recollected their sources of origination and meaning for everyday life, in the 'lifeworld' as he called it, they would be doomed to extinction (Husserl 1936). Either the sciences would become wholly absorbed into the production of technologies of mastery over nature or they would dissolve in a wave of revolt against all rational thinking *tout court*. Unfortunately, the rise of fascism and militarism in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s confirmed Husserl's fears, and the only remaining role for science in European society in this period remained as an instrument in the production of machines of war and persecution.

In a similar spirit, the Jewish-German émigré philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that theory in the modern age comes to be increasingly subordinated to the search for technological control over physical and social life (Arendt 1958). Writing in the 1950s, Arendt suggested that where the original *vita contemplativa* or 'contemplative life' of the ancient Greeks had been intimately bound up with what the Greeks saw as the *vita activa* or 'active life' of public political participation, the 'active life' of the modern age no longer has the sense of practice and deliberation informed by contemplative reflection. Instead, modern consciousness of the world becomes increasingly oriented to control and productivity, where science serves the development of technology and where theory and philosophy serve at most as 'handmaidens' to science. In contrast, Arendt wanted to see a world in which theory and philosophy not only assist science but also remind science of its moral and political responsibilities, in the face of the fragility of the earth's resources and the mortality of human life.

Science and social science

This ancient context of *theōria* suggests clues for ways of thinking about the relationship of social theory to science today. If social theory is the study of ways of thinking about society scientifically, we can also say that it is a way of thinking about how far it is *possible* to study society scientifically. We can say that social theory is a practice of thinking about what science and 'being scientific' mean with respect to the social world.

The word 'science' in English has close connections with the natural sciences and is often used synonymously with them. However, the natural sciences are not the only disciplines of human enquiry with a claim to the title of science. In a general sense, to think scientifically is to apply a method or methods to the study of something and to follow these methods consistently and transparently. Usually it involves an effort to distinguish systematically between things that exist independently of the person observing them—what we call 'data' or 'evidence'—and ideas that are supplied by the person observing them as a way of ordering what he or she observes. Defined in this general sense, it is clear that physics, chemistry, or biology are not the only subjects of enquiry with a claim to the title of being sciences. Other subjects of study, such as history, archaeology, or art criticism, can also be sciences. In

French, the subjects known in English as the 'humanities' are called *les sciences humaines*, while in German the humanities are known as the **Geisteswissenschaften*—'sciences of the mind', or 'sciences of the works of the human mind'.

The particular association between science and natural science in English reflects a series of developments in early modern European history in which a number of precedents were set by the emergence of physics and astronomy in the seventeenth century and the emergence of chemistry and biology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From around the late eighteenth century, a variety of attempts were made to emulate the achievements of these natural sciences with the establishment of disciplines devoted to the study of human social and historical affairs. These included economics, philology and linguistics, history and art history, and notably 'sociology'. For a long time, it was believed that the new disciplines were only sciences if they copied or imitated the methods of the natural sciences. According to Auguste Comte, who is the originator both of our word 'sociology' and of the concept of 'positive science' or **positivism*, only one fundamental principle of science existed, and all particular sciences had to be unified under this principle. This principle was set by the science of physics, which Comte believed to proceed by pure observation, undistorted by any prior conceptions of the observer.

Virtually all social theorists and philosophers reject this nineteenth-century positivist conception of science today. Almost all commentators accept today that human affairs cannot be studied by imitation of the natural sciences, and they also reject Comte's rather simplistic characterization of the natural sciences themselves. Sociology is not a science in the sense in which physics is a science. The 'human sciences'—the humanities and the social sciences—study meanings, values, intentions, beliefs, and ideas realized in human social behaviour and in socially created institutions, events, and symbolic objects such as texts and images. These embodied meanings, values, intentions, beliefs, and ideas are products of contexts of intentional agency by human actors in definite cultural and historical situations. Therefore they cannot be subsumed under general principles of regular cause and effect relations in the way that physical elements are treated by natural scientists, through repeatable experiments. Although natural scientists also, up to a point, deal with symbolic constructs that require interpretive skills of various kinds, a scientific way of proceeding in biochemistry remains significantly different from a scientific way of proceeding in a subject such as literary criticism or religious studies.

This question of differences between the human sciences and the natural sciences raises a more general question about the role of what is called 'method' and 'methodology' in social research. It is to this that we now turn.

Method and methodology in social research

To be 'methodical' is to be systematic in the pursuit of something. To apply a 'method' or 'methods' is to use some particular technique or techniques in the pursuit or study of something. In social science we speak of 'qualitative methods', such as a programme of interviews, and of 'quantitative methods', such as the use of statistics. To have a 'methodology' is to follow a rationale that justifies one's selection of these particular methods for a given

topic of study. Methodology thus refers to a theoretical principle or principles governing the application of a set of methods. The '-ology' in 'methodology' refers to a *theory* of methodical practice.

The central issue for any group of researchers who want to think about the methodology of their research project concerns the relationship between the pieces of evidence or data at their disposal and the theories governing the way in which they apply methods in order to produce and analyse this evidence or data. Here the word 'theory' is used in its more modern and familiar sense of 'scientific model' or 'scientific construction'. Two very general and basic questions we can ask in this connection are the following. What would research be like if it consisted *only of acts of data collection and no theories*? And conversely, what would research be like if it consisted *only of theories and no data collection*?

Let us look at the second question first. If research consisted *only of theories*, it would lack reference to the real world. Researchers would have no reason to go out into the field and interview people or analyse sources. If research consisted only of constructions in the imaginations of researchers, it would be empty of content; and it would be incapable of being validated or tested in any way. Any piece of speculation would have to be deemed as good as another.

But now let us look at the first question. If research consisted *only of data collection*, it would lack all order and sense. If research consisted only of heaps of information, it would be no more than a chaotic bundle of statements, impossible to decipher or evaluate or to apply to any meaningful purpose. It would be useless and pointless.

We can conclude from this that theory is impossible without empirical observation, and equally that empirical observation is impossible without theory. To paraphrase a famous statement in the thought of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, we can say that *theories without data are empty; data without theories are blind* (Kant originally wrote: 'Concepts without perceptions are empty; perceptions without concepts are blind') (Kant 1781: edition B, para. 76).

In reality, it never happens that a researcher's theoretical reflections entirely lack empirical content or that a researcher's empirical observations entirely lack theoretical construction. In every actual instance of research, a researcher's theoretical reflections are guided towards finding out some piece of evidence about an object of experience, and a researcher's observations of this object are always structured by his or her theoretical reflections. We can say that theories ought not to *dictate* or dogmatically *constrain* a researcher's field of observations; but we have to accept that theoretical thinking of *some kind* always underlies the researcher's observations.

Theoretical thinking supplies criteria for selections and discriminations of things that deserve investigation, and it is the only way in which researchers can produce ordered accounts and evaluations of their data. Thus theoretical thought is always presupposed in research; there are no observations that are not 'theory-laden'. There is no such thing as pure observation or pure reception of data. At a most basic level, theoretical thought refers simply to any ordinary person's mental ordering of his or her sense-impressions in everyday life.

One key implication of this connection between theoretical thought and ordinary everyday thought is that social theory relates in an important way to what is called 'common sense'.

Social theory and 'common sense'

Social theory is trained reflection on ways of knowing social life. But it is not only this, and it never begins purely as trained reflection. Social theory arises first and foremost from everyday life, from an enormous variety of contexts of conversation, discussion, and interaction between ordinary people. These are the same contexts that lead to the formation of such things as social movements, political parties, trade unions, and organized mass actions such as strikes and revolutions. Social theory emerges from these contexts and is only a more reflective expression of the disputes and agendas that dominate ordinary communication about social and political issues. It is itself a social product with a multitude of everyday contexts of origination.

X The Italian Marxist writer Antonio Gramsci once wrote that every ordinary person is, in principle, a theorist. Writing under imprisonment by the Italian fascist regime in the 1920s and 1930s, Gramsci wrote that 'everyone is a philosopher' (Gramsci 1926-37: 323). Gramsci meant that social theory is not something reserved for experts. Social theory is, and ought to be, the organic extension of social debates in which every ordinary person has a say and a capacity to contribute—and in the cases where it ceases to be the organic extension of such debates, it loses touch with its roots and is not worthy of its name. Gramsci's remark has its origins in the ideas of the nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who exercised a major influence on the early Karl Marx. Hegel held that all philosophy develops progressively out of ordinary everyday consciousness, by a process of reflection on lived experience. A further source of inspiration for Gramsci was the eighteenth-century Italian historical philosopher Giambattista Vico, who argued that all human beings have a capacity for understanding history because human beings *make* history. Vico held that where God made nature, man alone makes history, and that it is man's *making* of history which gives him his power to *understand* history. In this sense we can say that it is our action and participation in the social world that is the source of our ability to gain knowledge of history and social processes.

X It can be said that the only important difference between social theory and common sense is that social theory seeks to systematize and clarify debate about goals and problems of social life through well-defined concepts and techniques of analysis. Building on common sense, social theory tries to draw distinctions between different ways of reacting to social life. It tries to distinguish emotional and moral ways of reacting from impartial reactions. It tries to discern reliable observations in contrast to prejudices and stereotypes, and it tries to untangle attitudes of detachment from attitudes of partisanship and vested interest.

In this sense, a thesis in social theory tries to do more than the typical lead article or editorial of a tabloid newspaper. In the tabloid article, information, emotions, moral judgements, and prescriptions for change are very frequently mixed up together. Similarly, a thesis in social theory tries to distinguish itself from a party-political manifesto or a state ideology or a nationalist myth or an interest-group platform. Although its motives of inception are frequently overtly political, social theory differs from political activism in an important sense. While many schools of social theory retain close links to political protest, the activity of theorizing and researching problems such as labour exploitation,

environmental destruction, or sexism or racism remains a different activity from the activity of campaigning for policies to abolish them. The two kinds of activity depend on each other in very real and practical ways; but they remain distinct from each other. Social theory is not activism and cannot be turned into activism; it depends on practice and is guided by practice but is not the same as practice. This is at once its strength and its limitation.

To appreciate these ways in which social theory entails both an attitude of *involvement* in social life and an attitude of *detachment* from social life, we need to turn now to a range of issues bound up with the role of 'facts', 'values', and 'objectivity' in social science.

'Facts', 'values', and 'objectivity'

On one level, all social science is a search for facts, for 'social facts'. The Latin root of our word 'fact' means 'something made' or 'something done', from *factum*, the participle of the verb *facere*, 'to make'. In addition, our modern sense of the word 'fact' refers to any state of affairs that is *real*, *definite*, and *incontrovertible*.

In these two senses of the word 'fact', it is a *fact* that six million Jews died in the Holocaust; and it is also a *fact* that ten thousand Palestinians died in the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. What is important in these two historical facts is less the exact numerical statistic than the fact that something real, definite, and incontrovertible happened and was made to happen by human agency. The Shoah and the Nakba (the evacuation of Palestine) are not legends, myths, or fantasies; they are facts. They did not happen of their own accord or by the agency of supernatural forces or spirits; they were done and made by real human actors acting in definite social-historical conditions which can be documented, observed, analysed, and interpreted.

However, the problem of facts for social science is that facts only ever appear to us laden with *values*. The Shoah and the Nakba are significant to us from the standpoint of moral and political values: they stand out to us precisely because they are an affront to human values. They concern us because they are events involving sufferings and crimes which ought not to have occurred. Here the difference between facts and values can be understood as the difference between the world as it *is*, or was, and the world as we *would like it to be*, or not to be. How the world *is* is one thing; how the world *ought* to be, or how it might be made better, is another. One way of responding to the world is 'descriptive'; the other way of responding is 'prescriptive'.

But the problem for social science in the real world is that facts cannot be *separated from values*. If we had no values, if we had no interest in value in the world, we would not be interested in any particular facts. We would not be struck by any particular facts as calling out for attention and demanding investigation. Although we are generally able to distinguish statements that claim to 'describe' how the world is from statements that 'prescribe' how the world ought to be, we cannot extract facts from values in any pure way. We cannot put all our values to one side in order to observe the world purely as a set of facts, undistorted by our frames of perception and feeling about what is right and wrong with the

world. Social facts are meaningful to us only insofar they are value-laden, and we only come to be engaged with these facts insofar as we have values about how the world ought to be or ought not to be.

This explains why researching social facts almost always produces a diversity of points of view, which compete and often conflict with one another. Different social parties have different and often conflicting values about how the world should be, and different parties struggle with one another for the most authoritative account of the events and issues of the day. In the case at hand, numerous accounts exist of the causes of the Holocaust, and a broad spectrum of contested views reign about the causes and consequences of the founding of the state of Israel. Social science therefore has to consider a diversity of accounts, which very frequently turn out to be backed up by different sets of reasons worthy of consideration in their own right. In consequence, it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to speak of any one 'right answer' in the study of social affairs.

This raises a profound problem. If all research is possible only from value-laden points of view, how can research be 'objective'? How can there be agreement about the accuracy, validity, or insight of any particular piece of research?

There are ways of answering this question which need not lead us to think that value conflict is fatal for the possibility of validity in research. If facts cannot be separated from values, it does not follow that evidence about social life cannot be collected, analysed, and interpreted in transparent and methodical ways. The events of the Holocaust and the Nakba are both capable of being submitted to transparent techniques of scrutiny—for example: techniques of analysing documents and statistics, interviewing of witnesses, and the like—and although many different accounts of these events still remain, and are still bound to remain, it does not follow that no valid knowledge can be established about them. Furthermore, the impossibility of separating facts from values does not mean that researchers cannot realistically aim to work out procedures by which disagreements can be hammered out and rationally debated. If I am able to show you how I arrive at my position, giving reasons for each step and explaining to you how I believe these reasons to account for the matter under consideration, and if you are able to do the same, we at least have a minimal basis for discussion, which we can develop further through continued critical communication. Value conflict need not therefore entail that any statement by a party to a discussion has to be deemed as good as another, or that no agreement or no mutual critical discussion of any kind is possible. And it certainly does not follow that someone who denies that the Holocaust or the Nakba took place maintains as valid a position as someone who demonstrates that they did, by adducing evidence and methodically examining and explaining this evidence.

Objectivity therefore remains a realistic and rationally desirable goal for research. But it is important to emphasize that objectivity need not be seen as the only or ultimate goal or motive of research. Different schools of social theory take differing views about the purpose and relative importance of objectivity. Some schools view it as an end in itself, while others tend to view it as a means towards other, more practical ends—such as social justice and emancipation, or liberation from oppression. In general, schools that emphatically subordinate objectivity to the pursuit of moral and political ends of social life are usually described as having a **normative* orientation of thought. The word 'normative' here refers to attitudes that give priority to the 'ought' above the 'is', to determining how the world

should be made better, rather than solely to observing how it is. We will encounter many examples of such attitudes in the course of this book. But it should be stressed that numerous midway positions exist between the attitude of normative engagement on the one hand and the attitude of objective detachment on the other hand. All schools of social theory in fact advocate combinations of involvement and detachment, of both practical moral-political dedication and scientific distance. Social theory remains distinct from political activism but it is not a purely disinterested affair of reflection. As the German theorist Norbert Elias (1983) counsels, pure involvement without detachment would be dogmatic and moralistic; but pure detachment without involvement would be pointless and meaningless.

Social theory and other domains of theory

We have now discussed a range of issues with a broad general relevance to all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. These issues are particularly prominent in sociology and social theory but they are not, in principle, ones that *only* social theorists and sociologists are concerned with. The remaining sections of this Introduction will therefore try to provide some further characterization of the specific subject matters that social theorists and sociologists are concerned with. We end by looking at three main areas of overlap and difference between social theory and other domains: first, social theory and *political theory*; second, the relation of social theory to *psychology*; and third, the relation of social theory to *humanities disciplines*, such as anthropology, history, literary and art criticism, philosophy, and theology.

Social theory and political theory

Probably the closest cousin of social theory is political theory. Political theory has a long-standing position in the history of Western thought, reaching back to the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, as well as the Roman statesmen, the Christian medieval theologians, and the political philosophers of early modern Europe. Political theory is closely related to the equally long-standing discipline of *jurisprudence*, defined as the study of the just administration of law in civil affairs, or legal theory. And political theory is also the father of the discipline of *economics*, or 'political economy' as it was known in the eighteenth century.

✕ Political theory tends to be concerned with questions of a more overtly normative character than those most often addressed in social theory. It is typically concerned with questions such as: which systems of government best sponsor freedom, justice, and equality in social life? Or: when is obedience to a ruling power justified, and when is obedience to a ruling power not justified? In contrast, social theory tends to be more interested in issues about how the kinds of people who ask such questions first come to be constituted as social groups. That is, it is more directly concerned with the social behaviour of such groups and their structures and dynamics of organization.

✕ Some schools of social theory accord a more central place to political questions than others. Hannah Arendt is one writer who held that social thought has genuine value only

when it places political questions at the forefront of its agenda. Arendt emphasized the significance of the ancient Greek view of man as a 'political animal' (Arendt 1958). The philosopher *Aristotle wrote: 'Man is by nature a political animal' (Aristotle, *The Politics*, c.335 BC, para. 1253a1–3). Arendt's writings demonstrate the continuing importance of the idea in Greek thought that human beings are not fully human unless and until they take part in the life of the *polis*, in the political space. People who are excluded from the political space by privation of civil rights are prevented from realizing their human capacities—and by the same token, people who voluntarily exempt themselves from the political space by taking no interest in politics diminish their own human qualities of existence, at their peril. (And we may also note the ancient Greek word for a private-minded citizen who takes no interest in public political affairs was *idiotes*—the origin of our modern word 'idiot'.) This insight remains a vital consideration for social theory, despite a general academic division of labour between the two domains. Social theory is nothing if it is not relevant to politics.

Social theory and psychology

A second discipline closely related to social theory is psychology. The history of social thought shows many examples of close cooperation between psychology and sociology. In addition, the sub-discipline of psychoanalysis founded by Sigmund *Freud has been a pervasive source of influences in all the humanities and social sciences, as is discussed in Chapter 8 of this book.

✕ But we must note some important differences between sociology and psychology. Psychology is mostly concerned with the emotional and affective behaviour of individuals, treated as physiologically conditioned actors who respond to sensory stimuli from an environment. In contrast, social theorists and sociologists are mostly concerned with the structure of material and symbolic relations between individuals, treated as members of collective groups in definite cultural and historical contexts. Although an important sub-discipline of psychology is 'social psychology', concerned with individual behaviour in social situations, psychology is generally less well equipped to deal with collectivities of actors and with the meaningful self-definitions of these collectivities in specific cultures. A further key difference in this connection is that unlike sociology, psychology retains close links with the natural sciences. Up to a point, psychologists are capable of testing their hypotheses through repeatable experiments. This is not possible in sociology, except in a very limited way.

One of the strongest impulses of the French sociological thinker Émile *Durkheim was to demonstrate that society consists of a region of reality in its own right—a *sui generis* reality, as he called it—which could not be explained entirely by the methods of psychology (Durkheim 1895). In his famous study of suicide, Durkheim (1897) sought to show that the reasons for people taking their lives could not be referred purely to psychological states in individual persons, such as a person's feelings of depression or despair. Psychological states necessarily depend on sociological factors, to do with the extent to which social collectivities provide resources of *integration for their constituent members. Durkheim's vision of sociology is discussed at length in Chapter 2 of this book.

Social theory and the humanities

We have already mentioned several general commonalities between social theory and humanities disciplines. It is now worth looking at some more specific areas of interaction. A first important area is *anthropology*.

✕ Anthropology means literally the 'study of man'. As a discipline today, anthropology usually encompasses the study of human cultures and societies variously described as 'primitive', 'tribal', 'agrarian', or 'non-Western' in origin. These adjectives are notoriously difficult to apply, not least because very few cultures still exist today that are not affected in some way by developed socio-economic forms, typically originating from the West. Nevertheless, the distinctive concern of anthropologists is usually with societies showing more or less direct forms of interaction with a natural environment or ecology, based on elementary practices of cultivation of natural resources. Social theorists and sociologists share these interests, but they mostly concern themselves with the social structures of more technologically developed urban societies, with more complex political and economic infrastructures. They are generally less concerned with relatively isolated agrarian communities. Later chapters of this book discuss links between social theory and anthropology in relation to *functionalist theory and its critics (Chapter 4), in relation to sociological *ethnography (Chapter 5), and in relation to French *structuralist theory (Chapter 9).

Interactions between *history* and social theory have always been central to sociology and were particularly important for classical social thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max *Weber. The key areas of difference and cooperation between history and sociology are discussed at length in this book in Chapter 6.

Interaction between social theory and the *arts* and *cultural criticism* has also been very prominent in modern Western intellectual culture. In recent decades, renewed investigation of the meanings of 'high culture' and 'popular culture' in the context of consumer practices and new media technologies has led to a flourishing of academic subdivisions such as cultural studies, film studies, and media and communications studies. Many of the informing theories of these studies are discussed in this book under the chapters for *Western Marxism (Chapter 7), *structuralism and *post-structuralism (Chapter 9), feminist social theory (Chapter 11), and *postmodernism and its critics (Chapters 12 and 13). For a detailed overview of debates about art and aesthetics in social theory, see Harrington (2004).

✕ Another key conversation partner in social theory is *philosophy*. We have seen that social theorists share with philosophers a basic interest in critical thinking about the way things appear to be with the world. They share the same spirit of 'reflective wondering' that the Greek philosophers held to be the origin of all *theōria*. Reflection on the meanings of our lives as historical, social, and political beings is as important to social theorists as it has always been to philosophers. But social theory differs from the traditional central domains of philosophy, such as logic, *metaphysics, and *epistemology. Social theorists are more concerned with the contributions of empirical social research to our understanding of human ways of thinking, sensing, and behaving. They are not as centrally concerned as philosophers with the logical status and coherence of concepts, arguments, and belief systems.

✕ Lastly, we should note some differences between social theory and *theology*. Theology is the study of the principles of belief in God. Sociologists certainly share with theologians an

interest in religion in society. But sociologists are not centrally concerned with the internal propositions of religious belief systems or with the ways in which religious beliefs express contexts of scripture and sacred writing. Mostly they are concerned with the ways in which religious beliefs interact with social and political institutions and powers. Consequently, social theorists and sociologists are not as well equipped as theologians to deal with questions of the meaning of ideas of the absolute or transcendental or infinite in human experience. The question of whether God exists, or of how God exists, or of why evil exists, or why the universe exists, are not questions that can be adequately framed or pursued (let alone answered!) from the standpoint of social-scientific enquiry alone.

Conclusion

X We have seen that social theory is the study of ways of thinking about society scientifically. Further, we have also seen that it is the discipline of thinking about how far it is *possible* for society to be studied scientifically. Social theory is at once a source of explanatory concepts in social science and a source of ways of evaluating the point or use or meaning of such concepts. To theorize about social life is not only to develop scientific models of observable social processes. It is also to think critically about the conditions of possibility of scientific constructs. If all social analysis were purely theoretical, it would be merely speculative. But if all social analysis were purely empirical, it would be forgetful of its relationship to questions of meaning and practical purpose in human social life. In the most basic and ancient of senses, we can say that theory is reflection on the place and function of science in human existence.

■ QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 In what sense is there, or can there be, a 'science of society'?
- 2 How much does social science hold in common with natural science?
- 3 Are there any acts of social research that can be carried out without the aid of theories or theorizing?
- 4 If all facts relevant to social research are value-laden, what does it mean for social research to seek to be objective? Can there be any social research that does not seek to be objective?
- 5 How important are objectivity and detachment in relation to practical values of liberation and emancipation in social knowledge and social life?

■ GENERAL FURTHER READING IN SOCIAL THEORY

All chapters of this book contain guidance on further reading for specific topics. In addition, various general reading sources can be recommended. These can be grouped into the following categories.

Textbooks in empirical sociology and cultural studies

Among some of the most tried and tested textbooks in empirical sociology are James Fulcher and John Scott's *Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 1999), Anthony Giddens's *Sociology* (Polity Press, 4th edn. 2001), Tony Bilton's *Introductory Sociology* (Palgrave, 4th edn. 2002), Mike Haralambos and Martin Holborn's *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (Collins Educational, 6th edn. 2004), and Peter Kivisto's *Key Ideas in Sociology* (Pine Forge Press, 1998). Some useful textbooks concentrating on cultural studies are Chris Barker's *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (Sage, 2000). Other useful textbooks combining sociology and cultural studies are the following four books in the 'Understanding Modern Societies' series of the Open University Press: Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben's *Formations of Modernity* (1992), John Allen, Peter Braham, and Paul Lewis's *Political and Economic Forms of Modernity* (1992), Robert Bocock and Kenneth Thompson's *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity* (1992), and Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew's *Modernity and its Futures* (1992). Books designed as introductions to empirical social research with accessible theoretical elements include Tim May's *Social Research* (Open University Press, 3rd edn. 2001), Zygmunt Bauman's *Thinking Sociologically* (Blackwell, 1990; 2nd edn. with Tim May 2001), Mark J. Smith's *Social Science in Question* (Sage, 1998), and David Goldblatt's *Knowledge and the Social Sciences* (Routledge, 2000).

Other guides to social theory

Other guides to social theory that overlap with the present book in various ways include George Ritzer's *Sociological Theory* (McGraw-Hill Education, 6th edn. 2003), *Classical Sociological Theory* (Higher Education, 4th edn. 2003), and *Modern Sociological Theory* (McGraw-Hill Education, 6th edn. 2003), Bryan Turner's *Companion to Social Theory* (Blackwell, 2000), George Ritzer's *Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists* (Blackwell, 2003) and his *Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists* (Blackwell, 2003), George Ritzer and Barry Smart's *Handbook of Social Theory* (Sage, 2001), Ian Craib's two volumes *Classical Social Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Modern Social Theory* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 2nd edn. 1992), John Hughes, Peter Martin, and Wes Sharrock's two volumes *Understanding Classical Sociology* (Sage, 1995) and *Understanding Modern Sociology* (Sage, 2003), Bert Adams and Rosalind Sydnie's two volumes *Classical Sociological Theory* (Pine Forge, 2002) and *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Pine Forge, 2002), Patrick Baert's *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Polity Press, 1998), Alex Callinicos's *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction* (Polity Press, 1999), and Pip Jones's *Introducing Social Theory* (Polity Press, 2003). Edited collections of profiles of individual theorists include Anthony Elliott and Bryan Turner's *Profiles in Contemporary Social Theory* (Sage, 2001), Anthony Elliott and Larry Ray's *Key Contemporary Social Theorists* (Blackwell, 2003), and Rob Stone's *Key Sociological Thinkers* (Macmillan, 1998). Books concentrating solely on the classical social theories of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel are Ken Morrison's *Marx, Durkheim, Weber* (Sage, 1995), Larry Ray's *Theorizing Classical Sociology* (Open University Press, 1999), and Anthony Giddens's *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), as well as the already mentioned volumes by Craib (1997), Ritzer (2003), Hughes, Sharrock, and Martin (1995), and Adams and Sydnie (2002).

Collections of readings

Some useful edited collections of extracts from the famous primary texts of major social theorists—known as 'readers'—include Anthony Elliott's *The Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Blackwell, 1999), Charles Lemert's *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* (Westview Press, 1999), *The Polity Reader in Social Theory* (Polity Press, 1994), *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory* (Polity Press, 1994), James Farganis's *Readings in Social Theory* (McGraw-Hill, 1993), Jeffrey Alexander's *Mainstream and Critical Social Theory* (Sage, 2001), Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman's *The New Social Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2001), and Roberta Garner's *Social Theory: Continuity and Confrontation: A Reader* (Broadview Press, 2000).

Guides to the philosophy of social science

Some useful books treating epistemological and methodological issues not usually addressed at length in textbooks on social research methods are Mark J. Smith's *Social Science in Question* (Sage, 1998), Malcolm Williams and Tim May's *Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Research* (University College London Press, 1996), Norman Blaikie's *Approaches to Social Enquiry* (Polity Press, 1993), Gerard Delanty's *Social Science beyond Constructivism and Realism* (Open University Press, 1997), and William Outhwaite's *New Philosophies of Social Science* (Macmillan, 1987). A useful collection of readings in this area is Gerard Delanty and Piet Strydom's *Philosophies of Social Science: The Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Open University Press, 2003).

Guides to political theory

Some good introductions to the neighbouring field of political theory are Will Kymlicka's *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), Jean Hampton's *Political Philosophy* (Westview Press, 1997), Jonathan Wolff's *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1996), Raymond Plant's *Modern Political Thought* (Blackwell, 1991), and Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit's edited *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1993).

Reference sources in A-Z format

Useful reference sources in A-Z format include William Outhwaite (ed.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought* (Blackwell, 2002), David Jary and Julia Jary (eds.), *The Collins Dictionary of Sociology* (HarperCollins, 3rd edn. 2000), George Ritzer (ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (Sage, 2004), Austin Harrington, Barbara Marshall, and Hans-Peter Müller (eds.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (Routledge, 2005), Edward Craig (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Routledge, 1999), and Neil Smelser et al. (eds.), *The International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (Elsevier, 2002), also accessible on-line by institutional subscription and free of charge in partial form at www.iesbs.com

■ SOURCES IN THE PUBLIC MEDIA

A few recommendations can be made about sources in the non-specialized public media. Academic books and journals are not the only relevant sources. In the English-language media, this author particularly recommends the *London Review of Books* (fortnightly), the *New York Review of Books* (fortnightly), *Le Monde diplomatique* (monthly) (available in English as well as French, and other languages), *Radical Philosophy* (bi-monthly), and *New Left Review* (bi-monthly). In Europe and North America, some of the more independent-minded newspapers and magazines which regularly publish interviews and articles by leading world intellectuals on social and political affairs are *Le Monde* (in France), *El Pais* (in Spain), *Die Zeit* (in Germany, weekly), *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (in Germany), *La Repubblica* (in Italy), *The Guardian* (in Britain), and *The Nation* (in the USA, weekly). The British weekly magazine *The Economist* is also useful for information on world economic affairs. A further general piece of advice to the reader is that wherever you are able to read a publication that is *not* written in the English language, it is generally good to do so. The English language currently enjoys a global intellectual hegemony which it is often good to resist, wherever you are able to do so. There are thousands of excellent books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and websites which never find their way into English translation, partly as a consequence of the cultural domination of Anglo-Saxon business interests in the global publishing market.

■ WEBSITES

The Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG) at www.sosig.ac.uk/ Provides links to a database of over 50,000 social-science web pages.

Sociology On-line Homepage at <http://cgi.sociologyonline.co.uk/News/news.html> Contains an on-line work package in sociology, aimed at students and teachers.

Wikipedia Free On-line Encyclopaedia at www.wikipedia.org Offers links to the history of sociology, covering key topics, terms, methods, and theorists.

Dead Sociologists' Society at www2.pfeiffer.edu/~lridener/DSS/DEADSOC.HTML Provides useful accounts of key sociologists with biographical information and summaries of their work.

Sociological Research On-line at www.socresonline.org.uk/ Displays an on-line journal in sociology, containing articles on current empirical and theoretical topics.

1

Classical Social Theory, I: Contexts and Beginnings

Austin Harrington

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The emergence of social theory as a distinctive way of thinking about society is concurrent with the rise of modernity. The rise of a scientific way of studying society is itself a product of the particular kinds of social conditions called 'modern'. In consequence, to come to grips with the concepts of social theory, we need to have an understanding of modernity, and to gain an understanding of modernity we need to have a grasp of the concepts of social theory.

This chapter introduces some of the foundational contexts of social thought in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe that led to the emergence of sociology as a discipline in the twentieth century. The chapter sets out the fundamental characteristics of modernity as a condition of social life and the ways in which this condition is interpreted

by writers belonging to the earliest waves of recognizably theoretical social thought. First we consider some key meanings of the terms 'modern', 'modernity', 'tradition', and 'traditional'. Then we look at the chief historical dynamics of the development of recognizably modern social conditions and the various explanations given to these dynamics by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social thinkers.

In the last part of the chapter we turn to two basic questions which will be of concern throughout this book. The first is the question of how far the specifically Western European experiences of modernity and modernization that interested the first generations of social theorists have relevance and validity for *all cultures of the world*. The second is the complex question of whether the rise of modern scientific structures of consciousness is in every sense *good* for social life, or whether there are darker, more destructive sides of science and reason which we must consider.

We begin with some leading meanings of the terms 'modern' and 'traditional'.

Modernity and tradition: what is 'modern'? what is 'traditional'?

Our word 'modern' derives from the Latin *modus*, from which we also derive our word 'mode'. In a most basic sense, modernity is the *mode of our time*: that which is 'here and now', rather than 'then' or 'past'.

It has been remarked that our word 'modern' has its roots in the late fifth century AD, after the fall of the Roman Empire, when the Latin word *modernus* came to be used to refer to a new present era of Christianity, in contrast to a pagan past under the tutelage of the Romans. However, the first known occurrence of the word 'modernity' as an abstract noun is to be found in much more recent times. It appears in an article by the French poet Charles Baudelaire for the newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1863. Baudelaire here wrote of the experience of modernity in modern art and literature and the modern city as the impression of 'the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent' (*le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent*) (Baudelaire 1863: 12). Baudelaire imagined the modern artist as someone who experiences time as a line rushing inexorably forward into the future. As each moment of the present is cast into the past, the modern artist tries to save the present from its obsolescence as the present becomes immediately past and 'outmoded'.

Modernity in this sense evokes the idea of radically changing times. *Modernism usually refers to specific cultural and intellectual movements of modernity that dramatize this experience in various ways. Modernization usually refers to the process of emergence of modernity.

Modernity is often thought of as a period, with a beginning at a certain point in time. For some, modernity begins in the late eighteenth century with the onset of the Industrial Revolution in European countries and the spread of the ideas of the French Revolution and the so-called Age of *Enlightenment. For others, modernity begins earlier, with the Renaissance in Italy in the fifteenth century, or with the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, or with the revolutions in science and mathematics of the seventeenth

century. For still others, modernity is a more diffuse term that cannot be located in any definite period and is not limited to European historical developments.

Disagreements about when exactly modernity might be thought of as beginning suggest that modernity is not always best thought of solely as a 'period'. It is also possible, and in many ways more desirable, to think of modernity in a more open sense as a distinctive kind of *attitude to time*. In this sense modernity refers to an attitude of critical reflection on the past and critical distance from the past. It encompasses an orientation toward active shaping of the future through forms of collectively determined, rationally intended action. According to the historical theorist Reinhart Koselleck (1979), modernity is the attitude in which society comes to objectify its past as 'history'. Modernity is the time in which society reflects on its past as a definite sequence of events culminating in the present, not as a repetitious cycle. 'Our time' becomes 'new time'; and 'new time' becomes that which places the 'Middle Ages' in between 'our time' and 'antiquity'. Time thus becomes something that society seeks to master and to make its own 'project'. In the words of Koselleck, modernity sees itself as determining its own future, as continually expanding its 'space of experience' under more and more ambitious 'horizons of expectation'.

Modernity is frequently contrasted with what is called 'tradition' or 'traditional' ways of living, or 'traditionalism'. Our word tradition comes from the Latin verb *tradere*, 'to hand over' to 'to hand down'. It signifies the idea of accepted, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting. Appropriate ways of behaving tend to be set by precedent and example, by the way things have 'always been', by what the priest or the father says or by what the ancestors did.

One of the most influential ways of distinguishing between 'modern' and 'traditional' societies in social theory was established in the middle decades of the twentieth century by the American *functionalist theorist Talcott *Parsons. Parsons distinguished between traditional social structures based on what he called 'ascription' and modern social structures based on 'achievement'. By 'ascription', Parsons sought to refer to the way in which social advantages of wealth, power, and status in traditional settings are for the most part *ascribed* to individuals at birth, by inheritance and by upbringing in a particular *social class or social 'stratum', in which for the most part remain for the rest of their lives. In contrast, by 'achievement', Parsons sought to refer to the way in which social advantages of wealth, power, and status in modern settings are increasingly *achieved* by individuals, irrespective of the initial privileges or lack of privileges with which they begin at birth. In modern settings, the positions of individuals in the *stratified structures of advantages and disadvantages are by no means entirely determined by achievement: ascription through inheritance of a privileged or non-privileged class background still plays a major role. But the tendency in modern settings is increasingly towards greater *social mobility* as individuals gain or lose their positions in the distribution of advantages by intended planned action oriented to formal education and a professional career (see Parsons 1951).

Traditional societies are often vaguely thought of as being 'undeveloped' in various senses. A traditional society might be one with a simple subsistence-based economy, or one with no advanced uses of production technology, or one with no complex political institutions. Traditionalism is often associated with so-called 'primitive' or tribal social forms, or with medieval society, or with the societies of the 'dark ages'. Sometimes traditional ways of

living are blandly and problematically associated with all 'non-Western' cultures. There are, however, at least two reasons for being careful with the word traditional in these instances.

First, it is not really the case that traditional societies show no particularly developed uses of production technology. It is quite possible for societies to possess developed systems of material production and transportation and still to remain traditional in most important respects. According to the influential view of Max *Weber, societies do not necessarily cease to be traditional when they start to produce large quantities of material goods or to create armies or develop technical inventions. Rather, according to Weber, societies only cease to be traditional when they acquire a particular ethos of *methodical conduct of life*, when they acquire a distinctly calculative, planning, and *rationalizing attitude to ways of organizing and ethically justifying and codifying social life (Weber 1920a, 1920b). In this sense, Weber argued that the civilization of ancient China remained for the most part traditional in its ways of life, even though ancient Chinese civilization already possessed many of the technical inventions that the West only acquired over a thousand years later in the Middle Ages (notably gunpowder). In Weber's view, the distinctive feature of Western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was that it began to adopt a peculiarly rationalizing attitude to ways of defining moral and political values, even though it did not start to produce large quantities of goods or to invent machines of production until much later.

Secondly, it is important to note that societies can very often possess both traditional attitudes in some respects and modern or modernizing attitudes in other respects, at one and the same time. Societies and social forms can, for example, have both modern or modernizing attitudes toward legal, political, and economic organization and distinctly traditional attitudes toward interpersonal relations of authority and toward gender roles. We might think today of the mafia business family, operating by *patriarchal codes of honour and subordination and at the same time remaining entirely in touch with modern technology and the modern economy. Many contemporary nation-states also go to considerable lengths to preserve what they believe to be their 'cultural traditions', such as elements of their religious institutions—the Catholic Church in many countries—or their political institutions (the monarchy in Britain, for example) (compare Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1983). We can also say that many contemporary Islamic societies are both modern in some respects and traditional in others; and we can say the same of American society in the 1950s, and of Japanese society in the nineteenth century, and so on.

It is difficult, therefore, to speak confidently of any definite period of time when all or most cultures of the world ceased to be 'traditional' and became, entirely and unequivocally, 'modern'. Both the word traditional and the word modern refer primarily to attitudes and habits of mind and behaviour, rather than simply, or solely, to clearly definable periods and regions of world history. The social transformations that took place in Europe after the fifteenth century give us an exemplary insight into the ways in which social relations can become modern. But they are not the only contexts in which modern and modernizing processes can be observed; and European developments are by no means in themselves unambiguous cases of what is called 'modernity'.

With these points in mind, we can turn now in detail to the exemplary case of European modernity from the fifteenth century onwards. It is this case that most preoccupied the founding figures in sociological analysis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is possible to refer to this case as the prototype of *Western modernity* or *occidental modernity*.

Western modernity

It is helpful to approach the structure of Western modernity in terms of three more or less distinct dimensions of social change: first a *cultural* dimension, encompassing the rise of science and the decline of religion; secondly a *political* dimension, encompassing the rise of the state, civil law, and ideas of democracy; and thirdly a *socio-economic* dimension, encompassing the rise of an international capitalist economy, bound up with processes of industrialization and urbanization.

Cultural modernity: science and the decline of religion

The rise of the natural sciences and the rediscovery of mathematics in the seventeenth century are central events in the intellectual development of Western modernity. They find dramatic expression in such famous episodes as Galileo's confrontation with the papacy in 1616. Galileo sought to demonstrate the truth of the theory that the earth revolved around the sun and that the earth was not the centre of the universe. This helio-centric theory had first been mooted by the Polish astronomer Copernicus in the sixteenth century, but was at odds with the traditional teachings of the Church. Galileo invented the telescope in order to *prove* the theory. He sought to show that knowledge was genuine only if it had a basis in demonstrable **empirical observation*. Similarly, Francis **Bacon* in England asserted that true knowledge arose solely from the authority of *experience* and *experiment* and personal individual enquiry, not from traditions and precedents. In Bacon's famous phrase, knowledge had to be free of such 'idols of the mind' as myth, superstition, and church dogma.

The seventeenth-century philosophers and scientists rejected the long-standing teaching of medieval Christianity that all creatures and things on the earth had a innate purpose in nature preordained by God. They rejected the Church's **teleological* view of the universe and replaced it with a *mechanistic* one. Creatures and things were regarded as subject to laws of nature that could be scientifically discovered and rationally deduced. God was the guarantor of laws that man could discover for himself and put to his own use. In this sense, Isaac Newton set out to determine the laws of gravity and motion, which God had set down in nature, by 'pre-established harmony'—in the phrase of the rationalist philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. Similarly René **Descartes* set out to prove—purely by **deductive* philosophical reasoning, without appeal to any external authority—that consciousness cannot be deceptive. My existence is real, Descartes argued, because I *think* my existence: 'I think, therefore I am'; *cogito ergo sum*. Methodical thinking alone provides a basis for knowledge of the world, not scripture or revelation. God must exist, not because

the Church or the Bible says that he exists, but because God's non-existence is not logically conceivable. In this regard, the fundamental intellectual feature of Western modernity is that the rationally thinking 'I', the ego, or the **Subject*, comes to occupy the centre of the universe. In the development of European philosophy after Descartes, the 'Subject' becomes the last instance of authority before God.

The fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance and the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation in northern Europe are significant because they set in motion the rise of the idea of **autonomously thinking individuals*, who are personally responsible for their own destinies and their own salvation. Renaissance artists and scientists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, together with the Protestant religious teachers Martin **Luther* and Jean **Calvin* and humanist political writers such as Thomas **More*, **Erasmus* of Rotterdam, and Michel de **Montaigne*, all played their part in the generation of a sequence of developments lasting over several centuries to which we today refer by the name of **secularization*.

Secularization denotes the diminishing power and influence of formal religious institutions over social and political life. From the sixteenth century onwards, a distinction gradually comes to be introduced in Western European society between precepts set down by the Church and precepts gained through independent reading of scripture by individuals or through science and philosophy. It is this gradual process of separation between different sources of cultural authority that leads to the slow retreat of religion from the realms of education, art, philosophy, politics, and public discourse during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in Europe. In the nineteenth century, Charles **Darwin's Origin of Species* of 1859 represents one of the most emblematic moments of this process of secularization.

Although religious beliefs today may not appear to have diminished in prominence in public life, religion in the Western world no longer possesses anything like the same legally and politically sanctioned sovereignty over social organization that it enjoyed five hundred years ago. In the Western world today, despite the reversion to Creationism in the teaching curricula of some US high schools, the intellectual authority of religion over definitions of the physical universe and of the social world has been replaced, definitively, by that of science.

Elements of cultural and intellectual modernity and the spread of secularization are closely bound up with aspects of *political modernity*. It is to these concurrent political dimensions of modernity in Europe that we now turn.

Political modernity: law, democracy, and the state

During the period of the sixteenth-century Protestant conversions in northern Europe, notably in England, Holland, parts of Germany, and parts of Switzerland, the Catholic Church centred in Rome became increasingly subordinate to a new political agency in European history. This new political agency is the *state*, and especially the *nation-state*.

The rise of the state was a leading consideration for numerous legal and political writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These figures wrote in the wake of wars of religion and deep factional conflicts driven by parties claiming divine warrant for their

actions—notably the Civil War in England and the Thirty Years War in Germany, as well as the Dutch Protestant revolt against the Spanish empire at the end of the sixteenth century. It was in reaction to these kinds of events that a conception of the highest sovereignty of the state in maintaining law and order came to be developed in the writings of political philosophers such as Niccolò *Machiavelli and Thomas *Hobbes. This conception is often known as the doctrine of ‘reason of state’. A conception of toleration, or state protection for freedom of religious conscience, in return for obedience to the laws of the state, occurred later in the writings of John *Locke. In eighteenth-century France, Locke’s influence joined with increasing calls in public life for constitutional reform and for limitation of the powers of both the monarchy and the Church. These calls eventually culminated in revolution in 1789, abolition of the monarchy, and an attempt by Napoleon to spread the revolution to the rest of Europe in the early years of the nineteenth century.

In the New World, the men who met in Philadelphia to draft the Constitution in 1787 appealed to these same principles of separation between Church and state, and between the powers of the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. They invoked the principles of representative democracy, of popular sovereignty and ‘rights of man’. A key political idea of Western modernity is here that the state receives its authority to rule not by divine sanction—descending through a monarch, an emperor or a pope—but solely from the collective will of the *people*, or the ‘nation’. According to this world-view, the people are endowed with inalienable rights, and the people alone resolve to vest authority in a sovereign power. In this connection, the French revolutionary slogan ‘liberty, equality, and fraternity’ finds its counterpart in Thomas *Jefferson’s ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’.

Ideas of representative democracy and popular sovereignty emerged from the ‘Age of Reason’ or ‘Age of Enlightenment’ in eighteenth-century Europe. The writers of the *Enlightenment saw themselves as standing for rational scrutiny, enquiry, and, above all, ‘critique’. In Prussia in the 1780s, the philosopher Immanuel *Kant titled his three chief works of philosophy *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgement* (1790). In an essay of 1784, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment’, Kant spoke of ‘man’s *emancipation from his self-incurred immaturity’ (Kant 1784). By ‘immaturity’ Kant meant uncritical submission to authority, at the expense of individual reflection, responsibility, and autonomy. Man’s immaturity was ‘self-incurred’ because man had not yet found the courage to use his own innate faculties of reason. Man had instead surrendered control of his life to powers of questionable legitimacy—to monarchs and priests.

The ideas of French Enlightenment philosophers such as *Voltaire, *Montesquieu, *Rousseau, and *Diderot included the precept that all people are equal before the law and are innocent until proved guilty. They also included the insistence that illness and misfortune are not symptoms of divine malediction but have natural and social causes, and that religious and *metaphysical ideas develop from definite historical customs, not from timeless essences. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these ideas led to numerous projects of reform and rational administration of the institutions of social life, including the foundation of state schools, hospitals, prisons, and police forces.

We now turn to the last feature of processes of modernization in the West concerning changes in the *economic* structures of society.

Socio-economic modernity: capitalism, industry, and the rise of cities

The rise of science as an intellectual force in Western modernity would not have been possible without at least two further factors. These included, first, the emergence of a social methodical ethos oriented to technical applications of scientific knowledge, and, second the emergence of a capitalist economy that stood to profit from the kinds of controlled experimental thinking that science represented. In this connection, many cultural historians have pointed out that while both the ancient Greeks and the early medieval Arab philosophers possessed virtually all the science and mathematics that early modern Europe possessed, what the Greeks and the Arabs did *not* share was the early modern Europeans’ drive to separate science and mathematics from myth and religion and to seek redemption for science solely through its *this-worldly* technical and economic applications.

The existence of a continuous this-worldly demand for science was crucial for Western Europe’s massive political and economic expansion from the fifteenth century onwards. Growths in merchant shipping trade, voyages of exploration across land and sea, to the East and to the West, and the discovery and colonization of the two continents of North and South America, were all crucial socio-economic developments. The cultural and political dimensions of Western modernity are fundamentally bound up with the spread of an international capitalistic trading system that continually sought and gained new markets, new sources of raw materials, and notably new sources of labour in the case of the slave trade.

It has been argued that the growth of an international trading system emanating from medieval European seaports such as Genoa, Pisa, Venice, London, Lisbon, and Amsterdam arose from some key changes in the practices of individual merchants. Merchants came to operate less and less on an ad hoc basis and more and more as organized trading companies, or ‘societies’. They began to separate assets deemed to belong to the *family household* from assets deemed to belong independently to the *business*. Merchants acquired salaried employees, made use of accounting systems, and increasingly forged deals through intermediary partners or middlemen. Another important factor in this process was the greatly increased ability of moneylenders to lend capital to merchants and to charge interest on loans without the constraint of the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church against interest as a manifestation of the sin of greed. Later, the emergence of a complex capitalist economy was consolidated by the foundation of national banks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and by the development of private property laws designed to protect property against arbitrary taxation. National banks and property laws helped merchants and industrialists to make reliable estimates of prices, to calculate necessary quantities of supplies, and hence to make predictable long-term investments of capital.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is possible to single out five basic factors accounting for the emergence of an advanced industrial capitalist economy in Europe. These are:

1. Enclosure and conversion of portions of common land into *private estates*, making possible concentrated large-scale farming and industrial development.
2. *Industrialization*, marked by replacement of artisans’ workshops by factories employing systematically organized labour forces and machine technologies involved in both energy extraction and the manufacturing process.

3. *Free-trade* policies, based on the removal of state tariffs on imported goods. These mark the definitive end of all barter trading and the universal use of *money* as an abstract bearer of exchange value. Wealth is seen as increasing not by hoarding within the confines of a nation-state (a doctrine known as 'mercantilism'), but by its continual *free circulation* as capital.
4. *Urbanization*, marked by large industrial cities linked to trading ports and tied into a global economy. The cities grew from influxes of migrants from the countryside unable to find work on the land after processes of enclosure.
5. *Population growth*, arising from the demand for large industrial labour forces. Low wage levels meant that nuclear family units needed to rear greater numbers of working children to ensure a family's survival.

Processes of industrialization and urbanization and ideas of democracy and enlightenment were all central considerations for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social critics and thinkers. In the next section we turn to the ways in which these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers developed ideas that were to become key objects of attention for canonical figures in social thought such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber and thus helped to lay some of the foundations for the discipline we know today as 'sociology'.

Social theory in the nineteenth century

Social thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is represented by a number of key movements and a number of influential thinkers. In the following, we consider the movements of *political economy* and *utilitarianism*, *liberalism*, *positivism*, *socialism*, and theories of *social elites*. These are represented by the names—among others—of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michels, and Ferdinand Tönnies. We begin by looking at political economy and utilitarianism.

Political economy and utilitarianism: Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham

✕ Political economy refers to a succession of writers active from the late eighteenth century onwards, mostly in England and Scotland. Of all the works of British political economy, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* of 1776 is widely recognized as the founding text of modern economic analysis. Smith and his disciples saw themselves as discovering laws of social behaviour that had universal application. These laws famously included the theorem that prices rise when goods are in short supply and drop when goods are abundant; and rise when goods are in demand and drop when they are not in demand. The political economists saw market theory as a solution to the moral problems of society. They proposed that egoistic action by individuals in private in fact had beneficial consequences in public. If each individual specialized in a particular trade and sold the products of this trade while purchasing the products of another, all individuals would help each other

to satisfy their own interests. Adam Smith famously spoke of a 'hidden hand' of the market that coordinates private individual action through a collective mechanism of wealth distribution.

✕ A little later, mostly in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the movement known as *utilitarianism* developed out of the ideas of the political economists and the French Enlightenment critics, gaining currency mostly in early nineteenth-century Britain. The utilitarians maintained that traditional forms of philosophy and theology rested on irrational and unscientific assumptions. They believed that if society was to make progress and find practical benefit in its intellectual pursuits, it had to replace philosophical speculation by the scientific study of *utility*. Utilitarianism is chiefly associated with the writings of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who contributed to the foundation of the University of London as England's first entirely secular university. Bentham famously stated that the purpose of government was to guarantee 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' (Bentham 1789). A rational society was one that maximized the aggregate well-being of its members by dispensing with wasteful or luxury pursuits for the few (such as high art and classical learning) and using the proceeds of these savings to satisfy the material needs of the greatest mass in society. Bentham and the utilitarians also emphasized that the purpose of the treatment of criminals by the state should be not only to punish but also to *reform* them. Bentham designed a plan for the modern prison which he called the 'Panopticon', allowing all prisoners to be surveyed and supposedly cared for by prison guards from the same vantage point. In addition, the utilitarians placed particular importance in medicine and the scientific study of health and illness. They insisted that society had to rid itself of all association of disease, deformity, and insanity with religious and superstitious notions of punishment for sin or demonic possession.

Closely linked to political economy and utilitarianism was the spread of the movement throughout the nineteenth century known in very broad terms as *liberalism*.

Liberalism and civil society: John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville

✕ Liberalism in nineteenth-century Europe and North America encompassed the belief that progress lay in the development of parliamentary democracy and constitutional law. Also important to nineteenth-century liberalism was the separation of religious affiliation from affairs of state, and especially from the provision of education. All the essential principles of nineteenth-century liberalism are succinctly formulated in the writings of the English Victorian philosopher John Stuart Mill, most notably in his *On Liberty* of 1859. As a 'dominant ideology', liberalism in the nineteenth century meant freedom to own property and to trade in property and commodities without excessive taxation and arbitrary interference by the state. The defence of liberty was construed in 'negative' terms as the protection of each person's freedom to do as he or she pleases without harm to the freedom of another person to do the same. Government had to be 'limited', and it had to be 'representative' of the interests of the society it served. The state was to be the faithful servant of *civil society*.

The term 'civil society' in social thought—a term first developed by the eighteenth-century English and Scottish political economists—has come to refer to institutions in society that mediate between the laws and actions of the state and the private self-interested actions of

individuals and families. In the context of nineteenth-century liberal ideology, civil society essentially encompassed all those who owned property, all those who owned a stake in the wealth of the nation, and who therefore held an entitlement to the vote. Civil society thus referred predominantly to the social and political agency of the *middle classes*. The German term for civil society, *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, expressed in its very semantic form this key social fact that civil society is the society of the *burghers* or the *bourgeoisie*, the people of the towns. The bourgeoisie referred to those people whose wealth derived not from long-standing rent on inherited land—as with the aristocracy—but from trade and industry. Civil society in this respect also included the Jews among the European middle classes, many of whom held banking interests and who gained various civil rights in the nineteenth century, but who had previously been excluded from political and legal representation.

Recent decades have seen several influential historical studies of the relationship between liberal political ideology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the growth of an international capitalist economy. Three important examples of these are the works of the historians Albert *Hirschman, Karl *Polanyi, and Eric *Hobsbawm. These historians' writings are discussed in Box 1.

BOX 1. MODERNITY AND THE CAPITALIST ECONOMY: ALBERT HIRSCHMAN, KARL POLANYI, AND ERIC HOBSBAWM

In *The Passions and the Interests* Albert *Hirschman (1977) describes how dominant political values began to change in the eighteenth century with the rise of an *individualistic market economy. Human nature was once thought to be vulnerable to uncontrollable 'passions'—chiefly greed, envy, and wrath—which disrupted the commonwealth and had to be repressed by a strong state. In the eighteenth century, a new *ideology arose that held that these passions could be harmonized with the social good when they were transformed into 'interests'. Commerce was thought to 'soften' and 'civilize' human nature, by transforming malevolent 'passions' into benevolent 'interests'.

In his book *The Great Transformation*, the Hungarian historian Karl *Polanyi (1944) investigated the system of free trade in the nineteenth century that allowed European nations to gain supremacy over the world economy. Trade provided an incentive for nation-states to avoid declaring war on one another. It largely accounts for the relatively long period of peace in the nineteenth century. However, the international free-trade system also increasingly eroded and 'disembedded' the social fabric of the European nations. According to Polanyi, it was this structural social *'disembedding' that eventually created the conditions of chronic social conflict that were to culminate in the rise of fascism in twentieth-century Europe.

The British Marxist historian Eric *Hobsbawm provides an illuminating periodization of modern social history in his four books *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848*, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, *The Age of Empire 1875–1914*, and *The Age of Extremes 1914–1991* (Hobsbawm 1962, 1975, 1987, 1994). First comes a period of highly charged political agitation between the first French Revolution of 1789 and the defeated European revolutions of 1848. Then comes a period of both capitalist expansion and colonial aggrandizement in which the European states increasingly turned toward colonial market places for the products of their industrial economies. This created the series of imperial rivalries which exploded in the outbreak of the First World War. Hobsbawm characterizes the period 1914 to 1991 as the 'short twentieth century', in contrast to the 'long nineteenth century'. In his synopsis, the twentieth century effectively came to a close with the fall of the communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc and the end of the Cold War.

✕Over the course of the nineteenth century, the right to vote was slowly extended to less wealthy sections of the population in various parts of Europe, based on a lower property franchise. We must, however, bear in mind that truly universal suffrage, including crucially the extension of the vote to women, did not arrive until the twentieth century. And we must not forget that in the nineteenth-century USA, where European immigrants enjoyed more rights than they had done in the Old World, black Americans remained slaves until the Civil War and did not gain full civil rights until the 1960s.

In France in the 1830s, in the period of the Restoration of the monarchy after the 1789 revolution and the defeat of Napoleon, one of the most influential political commentators on liberalism was Alexis de *Tocqueville. Tocqueville was a civil servant of the French state under the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe. Today he is chiefly celebrated for his book *Democracy in America* of 1835, as well as for a later study *The Ancien Regime and the Causes of Revolution in France* of 1856. Tocqueville's main concern in his treatise on America was to evaluate the factors contributing to social stability in the New World compared with old Europe. Tocqueville reflected on calls for democracy and reform in eighteenth-century French society. These calls never found realization in France until the turbulent years of the 1790s when they soon degenerated into dictatorship under the terror of the despotic revolutionary Robespierre. Tocqueville contrasted this violent introduction of democracy in France with the more peaceful society of the United States. Because American society possessed no *stratified structure led by aristocratic elites with high status and no monarchy, it was less vulnerable to violent overthrow by mob rule. In Tocqueville's observation, *solidarity in American society arose from the presence of 'voluntary associations' based on small clusters of individuals able to trust and cooperate with one another for mutual interests. He saw these voluntary associations as having their roots in the Protestant sects of the original English settlers. They provided the basis for the spirit of *egalitarianism and personal self-reliance in nineteenth-century American life.

✕Tocqueville's writings have been influential for contemporary liberal thinking about pluralism and mutual cooperation in civil society (compare Putnam 2000). However, it is important to note that Tocqueville's view of American society was not uniformly positive. Tocqueville conjectured that as the American economy and population grew larger and more complex, Americans would forfeit the safeguards that had once protected them from problems of mass popular dictatorship based on a 'tyranny of the majority'. His fears have not been proved to be wholly misplaced in the more recent twentieth- and twenty-first-century history of the USA.

Alongside liberalism, a further predominant intellectual movement in nineteenth-century society was *positivism. Positivism is particularly represented by the thought of Auguste *Comte and Herbert *Spencer.

Positivism: Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer

✕Auguste Comte is not only the originator of the term 'sociology'. He is also the progenitor of the conception of science known as *positivism*. In his *Cours de philosophie positive* of 1830 and his *Système de politique positive* of 1851, Comte held that genuine knowledge arose purely from *empirical sense-observation, free of distorting *metaphysical preconceptions. In Comte's view, disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and history had to follow the

same principles set down by the already established natural sciences. Comte believed that empirical positive science would serve definite social purposes. Once human beings had found scientific answers to the world, they would be able to apply these answers to the removal of suffering, violence, and conflict.

✕ Comte claimed to show that all societies evolved over time by laws of progress. Societies evolved towards higher stages of *integration in which social arrangements were reached by peaceful and rational means. Comte spoke of a 'law of three stages'. First came a 'theological stage' in which human beings mistake the natural world for themselves. The theological stage is characterized by beliefs in spirits and supernatural forces, where human beings project onto the natural world their own habits of thought, like children who treat inanimate objects as though they are animate creatures. Second came a 'metaphysical stage' in which humanity overcomes superstitious habits and mystical images of its world by means of abstract concepts. Thirdly and finally came a 'scientific stage' in which humanity replaces abstract speculative concepts with empirical knowledge based on unbiased observation. In his late writings Comte spoke of the overcoming of traditional religions through a new 'religion of humanity'. This was to be a secular civil religion in which human beings would recognize themselves as the authors of their own existence. Human beings would find ethical communion with one another not in the Church but only in the *state* as the most authentic representation of their social belonging.

Herbert *Spencer in England developed similar ideas in the later nineteenth century. In his *The Principles of Sociology* of 1882–98, Spencer propounded a theory of social evolution influenced partly by the writings of Charles *Darwin. Spencer held that liberal democracy and limited government were the best adapted systems of resolving conflict in society and of distributing goods to its members. Tyrannies or oligarchies were vulnerable in relation to their social environments. Democracy, in contrast, was more stable in the long run. Democracy was better adapted and therefore more likely to survive, to be 'selected' through history.

Spencer's ideas did not directly reproduce Darwin's theory of the 'survival of the fittest'. Darwin had developed this theory strictly with reference to biological reproduction in the animal and plant kingdoms and had never thought to apply it to historical-social affairs. Nevertheless, Spencer's suppositions reflected many popular misconceptions and prejudices of the time about the social implications of Darwin's theory and the evolutionary superiority of European society. Both Spencer's and Comte's philosophies are in these respects shot through with chauvinistic prejudice. Their writings are read today mostly for historical interest and are no longer taken seriously as social theories. Nevertheless, their various concepts of 'evolution', 'adaptation', *'differentiation', and *'integration' later came to be developed by more sophisticated theorists in rigorous and non-chauvinistic ways. These notably included *Durkheim around the turn of the nineteenth century and Talcott *Parsons in the 1930s.

Theories of elites: Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels

The most influential nineteenth-century social writers active before about the 1870s were all liberal in their basic political views. Liberalism remained for the most part the dominant ideology of all nineteenth-century social thought until the outbreak of the First World War.

However, over the course of the century, written defences of liberalism show increasing signs of response to the rising tide of *socialism* as a political current. Karl *Marx and Friedrich *Engels were later to emerge as the most dynamic spokesmen of this movement with a massive impact on politics and society in the twentieth century—even though Marx himself did not establish a hegemonic movement around himself in his own lifetime.

An increasingly vociferous claim of the period is that the purely formal concepts of liberty, citizenship, and rights upheld by liberalism had to be made *substantive*. Several socialist writers argued that political equality of persons before the law had to become real social and economic relations of equality, through abolition of exploitation of the poor and reform of a state that served only the interests of the rich. This critique was central to the socialist view of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution serving the interests of the middle classes. In the socialist view, civil society essentially meant the rule of the bourgeoisie. In France, the Comte de *Saint-Simon and Pierre-Joseph *Proudhon as well as the English Chartists took similar views in the 1830s and 1840s, and there were kindred voices in Russian social thought, notably in the writings of the anarchist writer Mikhail Bakunin.

Nineteenth-century social consciousness became increasingly marked by emergent class tensions and conflicts as a result of processes of industrialization and expanding international trade. Much nineteenth-century social thought can consequently be read in terms of an attempt to preserve the framework of liberal politics in response to rising fears of the breakdown of social order and the claims of socialism. Yet at the very end of the century, both liberalism and socialism began to receive a series of highly sceptical diagnoses in the works of three writers chiefly recognized today as theorists of *social elites*. These are the Italian-born writers Gaetano *Mosca, Vilfredo *Pareto, and Robert *Michels.

Mosca, Pareto, and Michels wrote at a time that saw many challenges to the nineteenth-century system of liberal political consensus. These include the emergence of workers' movements and trade union movements, as well as conservative religious movements. The three elite theorists questioned the ability of civil society to contain and resolve these movements' mutually conflicting claims. They also doubted the sincerity and integrity of the moral and political ideologies governing these movements' representatives. Taking their cue from *Machiavelli, they speculated that it was the drive for *power* that explained the repeated failure of workers' parties to maintain an egalitarian structure and constantly to relapse into hierarchical structures led by elites and oligarchies.

In his book *The Ruling Class*, published originally in 1896, Gaetano *Mosca analysed the ways in which members of certain narrow social strata manage to reproduce themselves as self-perpetuating ruling cliques, while at the same time passing themselves off as representatives of the 'people' and of popular interests. Mosca subjected Marx's principles of historical *materialist explanation based on 'class struggle' to an analysis of the behaviour of socialist groups and parties themselves. He concluded that social-democratic and popular movements such as socialism never achieve their objectives without the leadership of a certain elite class of intellectuals who speak on behalf of the mass but who at the same time stand estranged from the mass.

Robert *Michels, in his study *Political Parties* (1911), applied this analysis directly to the organization of trade unions and socialist parties. Michels spoke of an 'iron law of oligarchy' in which political organizations, through the internal necessities of discipline and administrative continuity, inevitably become closed self-perpetuating cliques.

Vilfredo Pareto, in his treatise *The Mind and Society* of 1916 (originally titled *Trattato di sociologia generale*), claimed to discern two basic propensities of human social group behaviour. The first propensity of social groups was to optimize their pursuit of material interests, even at the cost of conflict with other groups. The second propensity of social groups was always to be led by small dynamic elites, however egalitarian the groups may feel themselves to be in their initial aspirations. Pareto claimed that all human social behaviour is driven by certain basic dynamics that he called 'residues' and 'derivations'. These essentially stemmed from the pursuit of power and material interest, dressed up in the language of morality. Following Machiavelli, Pareto classified some social movements as 'foxes' and some as 'lions'. 'Foxes' were short-term opportunist movements skilled at combining diverse interests and seizing power through cunning strategies. 'Lions' were long-term movements based on a principle of persistent 'aggregation', either of a conservative religious kind or of a revolutionary socialist kind.

Pareto's theories are the arguments of a speculative cynic. They rest on a certain stubborn idea of the basic dynamics of 'human nature'. They lack sensitivity to different self-descriptions of human actors in changing cultural and historical contexts. They also bear a certain intellectual complicity with the rise of fascism in Italy after 1920. However, there are certain elements in his work, together with that of Mosca and Michels, which find more sophisticated expression in other early twentieth-century theorists. Max Weber in particular is close to their work and was himself a teacher of the young Michels. Despite their conservative and sceptical outlook, the elite theorists also left a mark on the thinking of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci; and they have had a wide-ranging impact in contemporary political science, especially in rational choice theory.

The last sociological thinker we must now consider in this overview is the German writer Ferdinand Tönnies.

Community and society: Ferdinand Tönnies

A slightly older contemporary of Max Weber and Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies is chiefly celebrated today for his treatise of 1887, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, usually translated as *Community and Society*. In this work, Tönnies argued that what he called 'communal relations' (*Gemeinschaft*) had increasingly come to be replaced by what he called 'societal relations' (*Gesellschaft*), through processes of industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of a differentiated capitalist economy. Unlike Mill, Tocqueville, or Marx, Tönnies did not write explicitly from a position of political advocacy for a particular type of government or social order. He saw himself as a sociological commentator, rather than a political critic. But his famous book in fact makes clear a number of quite striking normative assumptions about the cohesiveness of the past and the breakdown of social glue with the coming of modern industrialism.

By 'communal relations' Tönnies meant a type of relations between individuals found in economies mostly dependent on agriculture in rural contexts, where small population units are typically congregated in villages. Families would be extended and members of kin would reside in close proximity. Means of livelihood would tend to be by subsistence, by direct economy from the land or small-scale craftsmanship. Exchange would largely take place by payments in kind or services without extensive mediation by money. Relations of

authority would be of a mostly personal kind in traditionally defined roles. Traditional beliefs and skills would be transmitted orally and by example. This created a sense of ongoing continuity over time and generations.

By 'societal relations', Tönnies meant a type of condition in which relations are characterized by commercial exchange of goods and services. Goods are not produced and immediately consumed from the land but are exchanged for money. Labour and services become formalized, through wage contracts. Social relations divide between public professional roles on the one hand and private personal spheres on the other. Relations between individuals are increasingly mediated by an intervening world of impersonal and anonymous objects, codes, and institutions. With the rise of money economies, communities become fused together as a 'mass' in the same places, in the cities, and consequently begin to lose their distinct identities. Different parties interact with one another primarily for definite purposes, without preserving a continuous personal acquaintance of one another over time. Social change thus moves faster and becomes more discontinuous.

Tönnies's account of the two types of relationship is somewhat simplistic and suffers from a certain implicit nostalgia for lost community life. Nevertheless, it resonates with many of the centrally accepted analytical categories of classical social theory. These categories came to be developed in more technical ways by Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Challenges to Western modernity: reason and the claims of science

We have now explored two basic aspects of the theme of modernity in social theory. First, we have discussed some leading substantive dimensions of modernizing processes in Western society, grouped around the three analytical areas of 'cultural modernity', 'political modernity', and 'socio-economic modernity'. Second we have looked at some leading theories and discourses of modernity in nineteenth-century European social thought, represented by the movements of political economy, utilitarianism, liberalism, positivism, and socialism and by the names of Smith, Mill, Tocqueville, Comte, and others.

We now turn to the two complex questions signalled at the outset of this chapter. The first is the question of how far these Western aspects of modernity have applicability to all cultures and societies of the globe. Is there one general paradigm of modernity that can be applied to all societies, or are there many different ways in which societies can be modern? The second question concerns whether there are any darker sides to the claims of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social thinkers about 'progress', 'science', 'reason', and 'enlightenment'. We have already referred to some notable ideologies and prejudices of nineteenth-century thought, and we must now look at these more closely. Put simply, can the application of rational and scientific principles to social life and social organization be regarded as in every respect a 'good thing'?

We take up these questions in turn, beginning with the issue of Western-centred bias.

Eurocentrism in social theory

To address the problem of *'Eurocentrism' and general Western-centredness in social theory, it is worth first noting some ways in which sociology came to be institutionalized as a scientific discipline in Western universities in the twentieth century. Some of the most influential figures in mid-century American sociology were European émigrés, and several were also Jewish exiles from Nazi Germany. As Europe descended into chaos in the 1930s and 1940s, sociology and social theory—like many other academic subjects—found a flourishing home in the USA. The relative prosperity and stability of American society in the 1940s and 1950s suggested that America's political and economic system represented a model for the global study of processes of social modernization. It was in the USA that many of the canonical concepts of scientific sociology came to be defined. These concepts had been mooted by nineteenth-century European writers, but not always in systematic ways. They included the concepts of social 'evolution' and 'organization', social *'differentiation', *'integration' and 'adaptation', 'structure', 'action' and *'interaction', as well as *'stratification', power, democratization, and the 'mass society'. These concepts received intense analytical discussions in the USA in academic journals such as the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review*, as well as at conferences and subsection committees of the American Sociological Association (founded in 1905) and the International Sociological Association (founded in 1949).

All the leading figures of this generation wanted to discard what they perceived as the ideological dogmas of nineteenth-century European thought. Norbert *Elias, for example, who emigrated to Britain, devoted his life's work to showing how the concept of 'civilization', or the *'civilizing process', had validity as a technical sociological concept only when it was rigorously distinguished from notions of cultural superiority (Elias 1939).

It is, however, fair to say that not all mid-twentieth-century social theorists overcame the Eurocentric and Western-centred prejudices of earlier generations of social thought. Many tended to take it as a matter of course that 'modern society' found its clearest and most paradigmatic form in the specific course of industrial development undertaken by European and North American society. Other world regions were often assumed to be still traditional or not-yet-modern societies. Furthermore, it was believed that insofar as other regions of the world became modern, they would necessarily take on the same features as those manifested in the history of the West. In the influential words of Max Weber, penned in 1920 and first translated into English by Talcott Parsons in 1930:

A product of modern European civilization studying the problem of universal history is bound to ask himself, and rightly so, to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie on a line of development having *universal* significance and validity. (Weber 1920c: 13)

These words of Weber should be treated with some care. Weber himself did not believe that other regions of the world either should or would necessarily develop in the same way as the West. He was fascinated by the sociologically relative position of the West in world history, devoting a significant part of his work to comparing intrinsic differences between the West and other civilizations of the world, including notably the ancient civilizations of

India and China. But in his concern with non-Western civilizations, Weber was to some extent exceptional among the canonical sociological theorists of the early twentieth century. By the time of the emergence of American modernization theory in the 1950s in the *structural-functionalist school developed by Talcott Parsons, the possibility that other cultures beside the European-North American bloc might represent alternative instances of modernity and modernizing processes was not seriously considered.

The assumption that only one basic paradigm of modernity exists, that this paradigm is represented by Europe and North America, and that all other societies of the world can and must reproduce this paradigm insofar as they become modern at all, has been challenged in recent decades by new generations of scholars concerned with problems of *ethnocentrism* in social theory and research. Since the withdrawal of the European powers from their former colonies in the 1950s and 1960s and the rise of increasingly multicultural societies, new sensitivities have arisen toward the relevance of different sociological explanations for different regions of the world. Sociologists have shown how different cultures and civilizations can be modern in different ways, at different times, and in different combinations of the features invoked by classical social thought. It need not follow that largely agrarian societies—such as large parts of India, Asia, and Africa—fall squarely outside the framework of modernity, or that the only respect in which they might enter processes of modernization is by undergoing industrialization processes on the model of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and North America. There are many ways in which societies become modern, and some of these may share features in common with Europe, while others may not. There are no fixed certainties in theories of social change, and there is no unilinear course through which all societies need pass in order to become modern. To borrow a phrase developed in recent years by the Israeli historical sociologist S. N. *Eisenstadt, there can be multiple trajectories of modernization, or 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2002).

From the side of *postcolonial, or anti-colonial, interventions in dominant Western discourses about modernity and rationality, two significant writers have been the Algerian writer Frantz *Fanon and the Palestinian writer Edward *Said. Their works are discussed in Box 2.

The darker sides of Enlightenment

We turn now finally to the second question about darker sides to the idea of *Enlightenment. This issue is also relevant to the question of the nature of Western modernity and Western rationalism. The men of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment believed confidently not only that their theories were true but also that their theories would be beneficial for social life when put into practice. Many of them believed that enlightened exploration and exploitation of the laws of nature and of the laws of society would naturally increase the sum of human happiness. In their view, the application of reason and science to society necessarily meant progress.

Today, from the standpoint of the end of the most violent century in human history, it is possible to give only limited endorsement to such assumptions. On the one hand, there are certainly *some* principles we can and should endorse. We cannot turn our back on the philosophy of the Enlightenment when we think of developments in medicine and of some technical inventions that facilitate human purposes by reducing dependency on

BOX 2. POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM AND 'ORIENTALISM': FRANTZ FANON AND EDWARD SAID

A new area of intellectual partisanship in recent decades has been what is loosely termed 'postcolonial studies'. Postcolonial criticism has influenced many aspects of contemporary historical, literary, social, and cultural studies. It has arisen partly as a consequence of ongoing ethnic diversification in both Western and non-Western societies after European decolonization and increasing globalization in world affairs. Two influential postcolonial theorists have been Frantz Fanon and Edward Said.

Frantz Fanon was active in the 1950s as a black Algerian writer in the war of independence for his country against French occupation. In *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) Fanon wrote of the effects of colonization and racism on the material welfare and the psychological health and mental outlook of African people. In this work, Fanon demonstrates the oppressiveness of colonialism not only in terms of its control over territory but also in its hold over indigenous African contexts of self-expression. Fanon shows how Western societies have enjoyed hegemony not only in respect of political and economic political power but also in respect of a monopoly on dominant theories, languages, and discourses of social thought. Fanon shows the importance of resistance to imperialism as much at the level of globally influential theories and discourses as at the level of the real institutions that come to be erected in the image of these theories and discourses.

The Palestinian writer Edward Said develops a similar position in his influential book *Orientalism* (1978), a study of the impact of Western ideas about the 'Orient', the 'non-West', and the 'Third World'. Said here analyses the carving up of the Middle East by British and French imperial authorities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the role of racist European theories about Arabian desert peoples. Drawing on elements of Michel Foucault's analysis of discourse and power (Foucault 1975), Said shows how the West's intellectual cartography of the 'Orient' has shaped and constrained the ways of life of Arab and Muslim peoples in direct institutional ways. Said shows how Orientalism is a Western theoretical construct that literally maps out the course of modern Arab and Muslim history with oppressive effect.

physically exhausting manual labour. We also cannot forget that our modern idea of a rationally organized state, guaranteeing universal education, health care, and social security for the elderly, the infirm, the young, and those in the process of seeking work, owes its inception to the ideas of the Enlightenment. A fundamental principle of modern criminal and civil justice systems is that the function of laws of state is not to wreak vengeance on guilty parties but to reprimand and reform them and to compensate the victims or injured parties. This too we owe to the social philosophers of the eighteenth century. Likewise, all modern ideas of 'civil rights' and 'human rights' derive entirely from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In all these respects, the idea of the value of applying enlightened scientific enquiry to political and socio-economic organization is not something we can lightly dismiss. It is the linchpin, the governing presupposition, of our modern civilization.

On the other hand, many sinister consequences of this confidence in reason and science have become evident to us over the past century. Today we realize that technological

inventions are not 'emancipatory' for human beings in every respect or in any unequivocal sense. Western medicine has been beneficial for society in many respects but not in every respect. The commercial application of biochemical science to agriculture and industry has not alleviated hunger, malnutrition, and ill health in any unambiguously positive way. Neither the welfare state nor the 'free market' has been a beneficial agency of human well-being in all regards. Hospitals, clinics, prisons, and schools have not in every respect furthered security, health, education, and knowledge for society. In some respects these institutions have served functions of control, discipline, regimentation, and surveillance in modern societies. Projects to realize 'utilitarian' ideals of the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' have frequently endangered rather than safeguarded values of freedom of thought, enquiry, belief, expression, and creativity in modern social history.

As will become clear in later chapters of this book, numerous modern social theorists have heavily criticized the more optimistic assumptions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social thought. Many writers point to ways in which ideas that appear rational can also be deeply irrational. Many emphasize that what is healthy and normal from one point of view can also be deeply pathological from another point of view. Many writers demonstrate that science does not necessarily contribute to the increase of human happiness and is not necessarily superior to myth or religion as a system of understanding.

One of the most horrific cases of the uncritical social acceptance of science and technology that has been of repeated interest to twentieth-century social theorists and philosophers is the invention and use of the nuclear bomb. Today the possibility of human genetic cloning may represent a new case of defective moral public restraint of the uses of science and technology. Both these cases represent deeply problematic instances of the application of natural-science knowledge to social and political life. But social theorists have also been interested in numerous misuses and misapplications specifically of social-science knowledge to social and political life. Critics have pointed to the ways in which governments and states pursuing policies derived directly from disciplines such as economics, psychology, management studies, and business studies can sometimes be responsible for dehumanizing or 'technocratic' cultures of governance in society. When governments and states exploit social-science knowledge for policies oriented overwhelmingly to objectives of efficiency, productivity, orderliness, and systematicity—at the expense of open moral and political public debate—there is a danger that social members become treated as pure objects of administration. There is a danger that social citizens become treated like patients of a social-scientific experiment in 'social engineering', to be controlled in mass numbers. Later chapters of this book will discuss the development of such critiques of science, modernity, and governance in the work of Max Weber (Chapter 3), in 'Western Marxism' (Chapter 7), in the ideas of Sigmund Freud (Chapter 8), in the work of Michel Foucault (Chapter 9), in feminist social theory (Chapter 11), in 'postmodernism' (Chapters 12 and 13), and several other contexts.

For many social theorists, one of most dreadful instances of the unrestrained application of scientific rationalizing principles to social organization is the rise of 'totalitarianism' in Europe in the 1930s, and in particular in the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews. This case is discussed briefly in Box 3, with reference to the work of Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman.

BOX 3. HANNAH ARENDT AND ZYGMUNT BAUMAN ON TOTALITARIANISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust has preoccupied numerous social theorists not only for the Nazis' barbaric use of chemical technology—lethal gas as a method of mass extermination. It has also concerned social theorists for the Nazis' use of planned, calculated, and scientific methods of controlling and organizing social agents. For many critics, the Holocaust is a terrible case of the misuse of both natural science and social science—specifically of social science perverted into the science of *mastery over people*. Two notable theorists in this regard have been Hannah *Arendt and Zygmunt *Bauman.

In her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, secretary of the planning commission for the Final Solution, published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, and also in her larger book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* of 1951, Arendt argues that the Holocaust was more than a purely contingent historical crime perpetrated in Germany in the 1940s against the Jewish people. Without diminishing the enormity and historical specificity of the Jewish people's suffering, Arendt argues that the Holocaust demonstrates a universal tendency towards barbarism latent in all modern mass societies. Her thesis is that when science and technology and rational techniques of planning and calculation are used for the sole and overwhelming purpose of gaining political and commercial control over mass numbers of people, society descends into barbarism. In her view, the two cardinal types of totalitarian regime represented by Hitler's fascism and Stalin's Soviet communism are only the most virulent examples of a tendency toward totalizing technical control over human beings latent in all modernity—including our own allegedly 'free' societies oriented to liberal democracy and market capitalism. Arendt argued that when violence is routinized, sanitized, and taken for granted in any society, the possibility of the perpetration of evil acts becomes *banal*. To the extent that Eichmann routinely followed orders and fulfilled the duties of his office, he behaved in principle no differently from any ordinary functionary of the modern state or of the modern business corporation. According to Arendt, Eichmann's shared personal responsibility for the Holocaust gives us a lesson in the 'banality of evil'.

Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) develops Arendt's thesis in notable ways. Bauman argues that 'civilization' and the *'civilizing process' do not mean the removal of violence. They mean only the control of violence, its concentration in the hands of a sovereign power. In this sense, it was the Nazis' highly 'civilized' use of rational bureaucratic principles of organizational efficiency—their use of statistics and logistics, their codification of state law, their sanitization of public language, and, above all, their evacuation of all personal moral responsibility from the actions of individual holders of public offices—which brought about the Holocaust. Bauman writes: 'the Holocaust did not just, mysteriously, avoid clash with the social norms and institutions of modernity. It was these norms and institutions that made the Holocaust feasible. Without modern civilization and its most central essential achievements, there would be no Holocaust' (Bauman 1989: 87).

Conclusion

Modernity can be characterized as a distinctive kind of social attitude to time. Modern attitudes to time tend to involve processes of critical reflection on the past with a view to projects of collective determination of the future. Traditional attitudes tend to be marked by forms of acceptance and preservation of the past, without a developed belief in rational social agency over the future.

Real historical contexts give us examples of many different combinations of modern and traditional attitudes across cultures and civilizations. The particular concentration of modern attitudes and modernizing processes in European society from around the fifteenth century onwards has been very influential in the development of modern social theory. Many nineteenth- and many early twentieth-century social theorists regarded the European and North American experience of modernity as paradigmatic for all societies. This Western-centred assumption of classical social theory is difficult to sustain today because it ignores many different possible trajectories of modernizing experiences in different regions of the world.

However, once we bear in mind this limitation, it is possible, and important, to underline a few key features of the Western experience of modernity. These features include the rise of an international capitalist economy, which is bound up with processes of industrialization and urbanization and the rise of the nation-state. Also important to the Western experience are ideas of democracy and representative government, together with the rise of science and technology. With the declining political power of religious institutions come processes of secularization and scepticism toward myth and traditional authority.

In the classical terms of Ferdinand Tönnies, modernizing processes tend to demonstrate a preponderance of 'societal relations' of impersonal instrumental exchange over 'communal relations' of personal localized interaction. Unlike most agrarian and tribal social forms, modernizing societies are typically extensively differentiated in their systems of political and economic organization.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European social writers frequently saw these kinds of developments in an unambiguously positive light. Although some writers, such as Tocqueville, took a more sceptical and nuanced view, others, such as Comte and Spencer, equated reason and science unequivocally with progress. Today we are less inclined to be optimistic. Today we recognize that reason, science and enlightenment are all two-sided affairs. As constructs of the mind and constructs of society, science, and enlightenment are implicated in some of the worst excesses of the modern world, including fascism, totalitarianism, and capitalistic industrial exploitation of the earth. But we should also recognize that reason, science, and the pursuit of enlightenment remain indispensable to the conduct of our lives. To think critically and responsibly about reason and science is itself to think reasonably and scientifically. Therefore it is advisable not simply to think of the follies of modernity as consequences of the use of reason. It is more appropriate to think of them as consequences of the *neglect* of reason, as consequences of a certain forgetting of the *moral intelligence of reason*. As will become clear in the remaining chapters of this book, this is an insight of cardinal importance to many of the leading themes and debates of modern social theory.

■ QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 1

- 1 What is a 'modern' attitude to life? What is a 'traditional' attitude to life? Are there any 'modern' forms of life that can at the same time be described as 'traditional'?
- 2 What features of social-historical change best characterize the Western experience of modernity? In what sense is it appropriate to speak of 'the West'? Are there any experiences of modernity which are not Western?

- 3 How informative is Ferdinand Tönnies's characterization of modernity in terms of the replacement of 'communal relations' by 'societal relations'?
- 4 What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European social thought for discussion today?
- 5 What is meant by 'the Enlightenment'? Is the Enlightenment a legacy for which we should be thankful?
- 6 Is it possible to speak of reason and progress in history? Is it possible *not* to speak of reason and progress in history?

■ FURTHER READING

For some good overviews of the makings of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European social thought, the following titles can be recommended: Stuart Hughes's *Consciousness and Society: The Re-orientation of European Social Thought* (Knopf, 1958), Geoffrey Hawthorn's *Enlightenment and Despair: The Making of Sociology* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), Donald Levine's *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), Wolf Lepenies's *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), Johan Heilbron's *The Rise of Social Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), Steven Seidman's *Liberalism and the Origins of European Social Theory* (Blackwell, 1983), John Burrow's *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought 1848–1914* (Yale University Press, 2000), and Raymond Aron's *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* (Penguin, 1965; 1968) (in two volumes).

An accessible encyclopedic introduction to European history and civilization is Norman Davies's *Europe: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1996). For an introduction to the culture of the European Renaissance, try Peter Burke's *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries* (Blackwell, 1998). For surveys of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a good reference source is Alan C. Kors's *Encyclopaedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 2002). For more in-depth discussion of debates about the rise of the West and the emergence of capitalism, industrialization, and the nation-state, see Chapter 6 of this book by Dennis Smith. See also the titles cited in the further reading for Chapter 6. For Max Weber's views on the rise of the West, see Chapter 3 of this book by Gianfranco Poggi, and also Wolfgang Schluchter's *The Rise of Occidental Rationalism* (University of California Press, 1981).

The further debates mentioned in this chapter about modernity, science, myth, civilization, technocracy, rationality, and irrationality are developed at length in this book in Chapter 7 by Douglas Kellner (on Western Marxism), in Chapter 8 by Anthony Elliott (on psychoanalysis), in Chapter 9 by Samantha Ashenden (on structuralism and post-structuralism), in Chapter 11 by Lisa Adkins (on feminist theory), in Chapter 12 by Barry Smart (on postmodernism), and in Chapter 13 by Gerard Delanty (on modernity after postmodernism).

For an introduction to the work of Hannah Arendt, see Phillip Hansen's *Hannah Arendt* (Polity Press, 1993). For a collection of extracts from Arendt's writings, try *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (Penguin, 2000). For an introduction to postcolonial studies, see Robert J. C. Young's *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Blackwell, 2001). See also Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray (eds.), *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Blackwell, 2000), and Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Dictionary of Global Culture* (Penguin, 1998).

■ WEBSITES

SocioSite at www2.fmg.uva.nl/sociosite/index.html Contains links to numerous sociology-related sites.

A Sociological Tour Through Cyberspace at www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/index.html Displays links to areas of sociology, with a section on theorists.

Virtual Library of Sociology, at <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/w3virtsoclib/> Provides a search engine with a useful theory section devoted to key thinkers.

Modernity at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernity> Offers a comprehensive overview of the concept of modernity with links to related terms and historical events.

The European Enlightenment at www.wsu.edu/~dee/ENLIGHT Displays useful accounts of the culture of the Enlightenment.