

SCIENCE, THEORY, AND THE ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a social science that, as a first step, requires its practitioners to describe the world and the events that make up daily existence. For most of us that probably doesn't seem a difficult task. Indeed, much of our daily conversation is composed of providing others with descriptions of things we have observed or experienced.

For instance, take the book you are reading and close it. Then raise the book a metre or so off your table or desk and release it from your hand. Next, describe precisely what happened. In most cases your description would provide an image of the book falling and give an idea of the sound the book made when it hit the surface of the desk, table, or floor - possibly a good hard thump. According to one dictionary, to describe something is to "set forth in words; recite characteristics of; qualify as" or to "mark out, draw." Description involves the systematic symbolic presentation of our perceptions of the characteristics of some phenomenon.

But sociology goes beyond this first step. It is fairly straightforward to describe what happens when you lift up a book and then let it go; but scientists must not only describe events, they must also seek to answer questions such as "Why did the book fall to the table or floor?" When we ask this sort of question the focus of our intellectual energies shifts from describing to explaining. While describing an event or phenomenon is an important part of understanding what happened, descriptions alone do not allow us to probe or answer the "why" questions. Most practitioners in virtually all disciplines and branches of scientific knowledge production seek to do more than merely describe the world: they also seek to explain it.

In the case of the dropped textbook you might offer a number of different answers to the "why" question. You could argue that objects fall toward the ground because there are dragons in the centre of the

130 Introducing Sociology earth that suck all objects toward them. You could postulate that the weight of the air pushes objects down toward the earth. Or you could contend that the pressure of light waves, most of which originate from above, pushes objects down. Finally, you could argue that all bodies in the universe exercise a force of mutual attraction toward each other, a force related to the mass of the body and the square of the distance between them. If you adopt this last explanation you would know that the force is called gravity, and you could note that because the mass of the Earth is greater than the mass of the book, this makes the book move toward the Earth as opposed to the Earth moving up to meet the book.

This admittedly simple example draws attention to a couple of essential points. First, explaining something - that is, dealing with why questions - means more than merely describing things. Second, answering the "why" questions can involve more than a single response.

Both of these points in turn raise a series of further issues.

The argument that explanation is more than and different from description strikes at the core of what is commonly understood as the project" or the objective of science. For scientists, the task of answering the "why" questions, of providing an explanatory capacity, falls to *theory*, which, in its simplest form, is nothing more than an attempt to offer an explanation of something. Most of us, for instance, have heard about the theory of gravity and know, even if vaguely, about the sets of assumptions and propositions commonly associated with that explanatory framework. In the case of the falling textbook, most of us would probably accept the explanation provided by that theory - a fact that raises a further important question: why would we find this particular theoretical explanation acceptable rather than, say, the idea that there are dragons in the centre of the earth sucking objects toward themselves?

The question of which explanation should be selected for a given event or phenomenon is a major issue in the scientific production of knowledge. The scientific approach calls for the systematic use of empirical data to help determine how useful a theory is in explaining a problem. Part of how we judge theories is through their capacity not only to explain events in the world but also to stand up to empirical verification. The notion of empiricism refers to the commonly accepted assumption in science that there is a real and objective external world that serves as the basis for testing whether a theory is correct or not. A theory should be capable of generating hypotheses - predictions or provisional theories about what will happen under specified circumstances - that can be tested by some method of gathering data from the objective world. There are, however, endless debates around the

issue of just how you test a theory and the extent to which accepting a theory predetermines the evidence you gather.

Since the beginnings of sociology, theory has been central to all sociological work. The social thinkers who influenced the emergence and development of sociology produced extremely complex sets of arguments and ideas about how human society works and how we should go about understanding it. What follows here will provide only a brief outline of how key theorists viewed the workings of human society and how they suggested we go about attempting to understand that society.

The Historical Background

To understand the emergence of sociology, it might help to look at the insights of one of its subfields, the sociology of knowledge. The central concern of that subfield is the relationship between the social conditions and structures that exist at a given time and place and the process of the production of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge attempts to place the producer of knowledge and the process of knowledge production within its historical, cultural, political, economic, and religious contexts.

The French thinker Auguste Comte (1798-1857) first used the term "social physics" to describe the new science he was attempting to establish, later switching to the word "sociology." In developing his arguments about why a new approach to the understanding of human affairs was needed, Comte was reacting to the conceptions of humanity and society prevalent in his day. In his opinion the existing conceptions of humanity and society were faulty, and the relationship between them needed reconsideration. This meant a complete revamping of how people explained the workings of the social world - a revamping of the sources and methods of social knowledge.

The Rise of Capitalism

In Comte's era, the modes of thought associated with the term "science" were just gaining dominance. As well, the emergence of science as the most commonly accepted way of explaining the world was part of a much wider series of changes in Western societies. Most importantly, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Western Europe was being transformed from a feudal to a capitalist society. The transition from feudalism to capitalism was a radical revolution in the true sense of the word, because it changed all aspects of society. The emergence of capitalist or market society involved radical and dramatic changes to the political, economic, family, religious,

military, and educational orders. In addition, an intellectual revolution changed accepted ideas about the sources of knowledge, about how we come to understand the world we live in.

In feudal society the church had played a powerful role, and one of its major influences was in knowledge production. The pervasiveness of religious beliefs meant that most people accepted the authority of the church as the definitive source for most, if not all, knowledge. They saw God as the prime mover or cause of events in the world, and they understood events in nature as being related to God, God's blessing, God's will, or God's wrath. The fact that not all events could be explained was accounted for by the viewpoint that humans could not possibly know or understand all things, and that this, too, reflected God's will.

As time passed and new ideas and modes of thought from North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, India, and other parts of Asia began to filter into Western Europe, changes began to occur in the understanding of the relationship between the authority of the church and the production of knowledge. Among the new ideas were the introduction of Arabic numbers and a revival of interest in the ideas and philosophy of classical antiquity. The emergence of Islam with its interest in a synthesis of ideas drawn from Greek, Roman, and Indian society provided an important challenge to the notion of Christianity as a universal belief system. The Christian response in the form of the Crusades served in the long run only to undermine the power of the church, because the returning adventurers brought back different forms of thought, including knowledge of classical geometry, new philosophies, and logic. As these diverse streams of thought took hold and merged with local improvements in technology within the context of expanding economic activity, major changes began.

The Copernican Revolution

In his classic study of the intellectual developments of the period, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, J.H. Randall states: "Two great revolutions in thought had occurred, and the course of intellectual history since that time is primarily the record of the gradual penetration into the beliefs of men of the significant consequences of those revolutions" (1940: 226).

The first of the intellectual transitions was the Copernican revolution, which dramatically altered the popular conception of our physical location in the universe. Before the sixteenth century there was broad acceptance, among Western thinkers at least, of the basic tenets of the Ptolemaic astronomical system. Claudius Ptolemaeus, known as Ptolemy, was a second-century A.D. Alexandrian astronomer and

mathematician who developed an astronomical system based on the premise that the Earth was the centre of the universe and the sun and certain planets revolved around it. The theory received broad support from the church and theological thinkers because it meshed with their understanding of creation. It made sense, many of them held, that God would put the earth and humanity, the centrepiece of His creation, at the centre of the universe.

The Ptolemaic system dominated thinking in astronomy and theology for centuries, but by the early sixteenth century it had begun to encounter problems. As new optical technologies were developed and Europeans began to move about the planet making stellar observations from different perspectives, the accepted system, with its explanations of planetary movements and locations, began to be questioned. At first the discrepancies between the Ptolemaic theory and the new empirical data were addressed by making additions to and placing qualifiers on the system. As a result of these additions and qualifiers the explanatory system used by astronomers eventually became cumbersome and complicated. When Ptolemy's system was used to interpret the data the astronomers were producing, the universe seemed to be a place of chaos. Scientists working in the field were forced to consider one of two possible explanations: either there was no logic and order in God's universe or the basic premises of Ptolemy's system were incorrect.

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), a Polish astronomer who studied in Italy, was convinced that God's universe was a place of order. Like other thinkers attracted to the new sciences, he believed that creation was governed by logic and that it was mathematical and harmonious. He proposed a radical solution to the problem of the order of the universe, putting the sun into the centre, with the Earth and other planets rotating around the sun. By advocating a heliocentric concept, Copernicus found himself under pressure from the authorities of the day. Church officials were concerned that his theory downplayed the centrality of the Earth and humanity in the structure of the universe. The Vatican declared his ideas to be "false and altogether opposed to holy scripture" (Barnes, 1965: 677).

In challenging the authority of the church, Copernicus was advocating an alternative way of knowing and producing knowledge. By the time his work was further developed by Johann Kepler and Galileo, using data produced by the constantly improving telescopes, the correctness of the heliocentric view was firmly established. The Copernican revolution established the importance of empirical data, or information gathered by some manner of observation, in producing knowledge. Empirical proof would increasingly become the means of determining the truth or falsity of a statement.

The Cartesian Revolution

Copernicus firmly believed that the universe was a place of mathematical order and regularity. It was the second major intellectual revolution - the Cartesian revolution - that established logical thought and correct reasoning as an integral part of knowledge production. By the time the French thinker Rene Descartes (1596-1650) emerged, the absolute authority of the church as the source of all knowledge was in decline. More and more intellectuals were looking to empirical data as a source of knowledge. Descartes added to the legitimacy of the scientific approach through the arguments made in his *Discourse on Method*, published in 1637. He argued that the first step in knowledge production is to wipe out all existing ideas, including those based on authority, in order to begin with an unbiased mind. The thinker would then start over again with simple and proved statements and, using the rules and procedures of current and formal logical thought, develop more and more complex truths. Knowledge and truth could thus be produced only by the rigorous application of patterns of deductive and rational thought. No statement not arrived at by the use of logical and rational thought would be accepted as knowledge.

The Emergence of Science

Although some intellectuals maintained that knowledge was totally dependent on empirical or sense data (empiricists) and others argued that knowledge came first and foremost from logic and rational thought (rationalists), a union of each of these "new" ways of knowing was in formation throughout the sixteen and seventeenth centuries.

Among the first to argue that true knowledge required the use of both correct reason and empirical data was the English essayist Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a contemporary of Descartes. But the first fully systematic exposition of the method of producing knowledge we have come to call science is commonly attributed to Isaac Newton (1642-1727). Newton's method of "analysis and synthesis" called on investigators to use both inductive and deductive logic, both observation and reason. Newton maintained that observation is the point of departure because empirical support must be provided before a statement can be accepted. Once a statement is proved to be true, it can be used as the basis for subsequent rational and logical thought, so that conclusions not provided by the immediate empirical or observational data can be arrived at through rigorous logical thought. The method of science thus involved the production of general statements by inductive thought working from data provided by the senses. Knowledge that claimed to be scientific required some form of further or subsequent confirmation or proof; and this was to come through the production

of deductive hypotheses that could in turn be verified by still more empirical sense data. Observation, in the broadest sense of the word, and experience, along with reason and logic, were all deemed essential parts of the process of knowledge production. A new way of knowing was born, which was soon to prove itself in the discoveries and findings that paved the way for the transformations of the industrial revolution.

The linkage between the capacity of the way of knowing called science and the development of new technology was striking. The standard lists of prerequisites for industrial development always include the presence of machines and technology (Clough and Cole, 1967: 393)-While some of the discoveries and findings that came out of the work of people in physics, chemistry, astronomy, and biology might be considered "pure science" (knowledge produced for its own sake without any direct application), much of the new knowledge was applied, that is, used almost immediately in industry and production. The outcome was an explosion of technology that formed the basis of the mechanization of industry, agriculture, and commerce. The knowledge produced by science, which was often cast in terms of the discovery of universal and natural laws, became the basis of a new economic and social order. A central idea in this new order was progress, and scientific knowledge became linked with this powerful notion.

Given the apparent successes of the scientific method in what we commonly refer to as the natural sciences, it is not surprising that some thinkers argued that this same method of knowing or producing knowledge should be used to provide systematic and assured knowledge in the social world. As the feudal order was declining and being replaced by the emerging market or capitalist system, radical social, political, and economic revolutions were also sweeping the world. Although it was obvious to many thinkers that the old order was on the way out, the nature and characteristics of the new order were not yet apparent. Among the key social, economic, and political questions that emerged was the question of social order.

As the power of the church declined, social thinkers concerned themselves with determining if the new scientific way of knowing could provide knowledge that would serve as the basis of social order, stability, and solidarity, as religion had in the past. During the feudal era, religion and the power of the church had provided a strong common set of beliefs and thus an important source of social solidarity. If people in the new capitalist order were to interact as unregulated, isolated individuals in market transactions, with each pursuing his/her own interests, and if each was to be allowed to believe whatever he or she wanted, how could a stable and ongoing community or society be possible? **If**

everyone just acted out of self-interest without an overriding concern for the community, would the situation result in unbridled chaos? Other questions also emerged.

As the political structures of feudal society collapsed and the new nation-states emerged, theorists began to ask fundamental questions about the nature of political power. What precise form should the state take? What is the appropriate role for the monarch and the feudal aristocracy in governing society? In the past those elements had claimed absolute authority and power, but now new classes and groups were contending for power. What role should the governed, especially those involved in business and commerce, play in the operation of the state and government? As the church declined, questions emerged concerning the basic role of religion in a person's life. Similar fundamental questions were asked about the role of education, the structure of family life, even the relationships between the sexes. Nothing seemed sure or secure in the way it had before.

Liberalism and a Scientific Politics

Among the first thinkers to address these kinds of questions in the modern era was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Hobbes believed that just like the rest of the universe, human society was subject to certain natural laws. He was further convinced that the new method of knowing called science was indeed the most appropriate route to the kind of "assured" knowledge that would allow humans to construct a society in accordance with the laws of nature. The methods of science were deemed to be capable of uncovering the laws of nature that governed human affairs, and once we had discovered these laws all we need do was ensure that our social, economic, and political structures did not contravene the laws.

Much has been written about the actual method that Hobbes used and the extent to which it followed what we would now call science (Macpherson, 1973: 230-50, 1968: 25-28; Nelson, 1982:138). But the precise method Hobbes used to arrive at his conclusions is of less interest for us here than his conclusions. On the basis of his observations and an intellectual process that Brian Nelson refers to as "thought experiment" (1982: 139), Hobbes concluded that human beings are by nature selfish, egotistical, individualistic, and possessive. On the basis of this conception of human nature Hobbes went on to develop arguments about what form of social and political organization humans should endeavour to create. He concluded that the "natural" form of human society was one built on competitive, individualistic market relations overseen by a powerful state governed by an absolute monarch.

For Hobbes and other thinkers who came after him, including political philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) and economists Adam Smith (1732-1790) and David Ricardo (1772-1823), the scientific method was the only acceptable method for producing knowledge. For these intellectuals, the scientific method marked an intellectual revolution. The knowledge that many of them produced related directly to the issues of social, economic, and political reconstruction. In their own ways the later thinkers suggested that, given their findings, the most appropriate form of social organization was a market economy combined with a more liberal state. Each of them produced knowledge that served social, economic, and political interests engaged in a critique of the old feudal order - interests working for the establishment of a new market-based liberal democratic society. The first fruits of the scientific revolution served as the basis for a critical analysis of the existing order. What was called scientific knowledge became a part of continuing political struggles.

The thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also tended to accept and use the idea of a fixed and universal human nature. Although the specifics of their conceptions of human nature varied, most of them maintained that there were fundamental, innate human behavioural tendencies that had to be acknowledged as the basis for the structuring of society. That is, most of the thinkers we commonly include in what is called the classic liberal tradition tended to believe that human beings were by nature competitive, acquisitive, possessive, and individualistic. They supported the social relations connected to a market or capitalist economy because they believed those social relations would allow the blossoming of the natural behavioural tendencies of human beings. Their particular emphases on the scientific method and the fixed and universal nature of humanity provided a distinct background for the development of Auguste Comte's ideas. Comte objected to a good deal of the logic and assumptions of this line of thought, and he set out to provide an alternative view of humans and society.

Auguste Comte and the Emergence of a Discipline

The substantive work of Auguste Comte is little used or referred to in modern sociology, but his contribution to the development of the discipline was enormous - apart from his early use of the term "sociology."

Many of the early social, economic, and political thinkers, in applying the methods of science to their fields of study, ended up being

sharply critical of existing society. As a result of this tendency, science had taken on a "critical edge," a tendency that greatly concerned Comte. He lived in France during the aftermath of the French Revolution, a period of enormous change, confusion, and turmoil. Not surprisingly, he became deeply concerned about the roles of confusion and chaos. From Comte's point of view, many of the radical changes and much of the social turmoil seemed to grow out of the findings of thinkers who claimed to be scientists, and who had become tied to an excessively critical project. Comte was not prepared to abandon science, he just wanted it to play a more positive role in social reconstruction. He also began to question some of the basic premises of the classical liberal thinkers, especially those relating to human nature.

Yet another concern was that most of the thinkers of the previous two centuries had been mistaken in what they identified as the object of their inquiries. The classical liberal thinkers had studied "man" in order to discover his basic "nature." They then went on to consider the sort of society that would be most appropriate given "human nature." Comte took exception to this approach, arguing that it was incorrect to postulate the existence of a fixed, universal, and unchanging human nature. Comte was working in an era during which European colonialists, missionaries, and military officials were providing a wealth of new knowledge about cultural diversities. In addition, the period was characterized by a growing body of historical data. When he put this new historical information together with the new knowledge about different cultures, Comte concluded that human beings were not and never had been static and unchanging creatures. Indeed, as he asserted in *The Positive Philosophy* (1838), what he saw in human history was a record of constant change, development, and improvement of both the physical condition and the intellectual faculties and abilities of humans. Comte believed that far from being the same the world over and across historical periods, human beings were quite different in different places and at different moments in history.

Comte was also concerned with the approach of the classical liberals at another level. The prevailing view of society understood it as an extension of the individual. This view led to a certain approach to social phenomena: it was considered appropriate and possible to first study individual people without reference to their society, and then to extrapolate the characteristics of society from the supposed natural characteristics of those individuals. Comte objected to this view on the grounds that society was not merely a collection of individuals. According to him, the "social" was a realm of existence of its own, governed by laws unique to it, and therefore society and the social must themselves be the object of investigation. Comte explicitly

argued that individual human beings, as parts of a larger social whole, must be understood within the context of that larger whole. He further argued that the social whole of which the individual is a part can itself be understood by means of an example drawn from biology - thus introducing an important analogy into sociological discourse: the organic analogy.

A living organism is clearly more than merely the sum of its parts. If we only examine, for example, the individual organs, tissues, and fluids that make up a human body, we cannot completely comprehend the complexity of the human organism as a totality. This is because once the various individual parts are arranged in a different way, what we see is a new entity altogether, and not a human body. Indeed, under certain conditions the totality of the parts takes on a life of its own, becoming a living organism and not just a collection of organs. Using this analogy, Comte argued that we must understand human society as more than just a collection of individuals. Human social phenomena are real, they have a reality and an existence of their own, and they represent an object of investigation for the new discipline of sociology.

Comte is important to the development of sociology, then, because he broke the mould of existing patterns of thought by systematically arguing against the prevailing idea of a fixed, static, inborn human personality, or the behavioural traits commonly called human nature. He said instead that humans are diverse and, as a species, capable of changing and improving their condition, character, temperament, behaviour, and ability. He argued that throughout history humanity had developed and passed through a series of stages, each stage different in how society was organized, how knowledge was produced, and what people were typically like. He maintained that society and the social are real, different, and distinct from the individuals within them. Further, he suggested that the social is a crucial factor in shaping and moulding the individual. Lastly, he argued that society and the social realm were the objects of investigation of an emerging new discipline called sociology. The objective of sociology was to be the discovery or uncovering of the natural laws that govern the social. The knowledge produced by the application of science to social improvement would provide a positive basis for even further human progress and development.

Comte's primary contribution was the development of a distinct discipline with a distinctive approach to the study of society and the social. What is most important about Comte, then, is the fact that he ignited the interest of subsequent thinkers who all, in their own ways, attempted to provide the kind of scientific basis of knowledge of society and the social that Comte had envisioned. Some of these thinkers

explored ways of studying society that were at odds with Comte's approach, but nevertheless they still claimed to be producing scientific knowledge.

Marx and the Study of Human Society

The German theorist Karl Marx (1818-1883) is one of three major thinkers, along with Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, who had a significant influence on the development of modern sociology. Each of these thinkers produced complex ideas that, once again, defy simple presentation. This problem is even more acute in the case of Marx because his name has become purposefully connected to various political agendas and regimes all over the world - an unfortunate situation, perhaps, because many of those regimes and societies bear little relationship to Marx's original ideas. In effect, the producers of a set of ideas lose control over the uses that others make of their work. The ideas and teachings of Christ, for example, have historically been used by Christians as a justification for waging war and murdering innocent humans, which seems distinctly contrary to the purpose of the original message.

If there is a single phrase that best characterizes Marx's analytical style, it is "the materialist approach." In this sense the term does not mean an obsession with the accumulation or possession of material artifacts and goods. As used in social theory, *materialist* refers to a distinctive approach to understanding human beings and human society.

Marx's materialist approach is based on a series of fundamental assumptions about what it is that makes humans unique and different from all other animals. He suggested that humans can be distinguished from other animals in a number of ways; but the central distinguishing characteristic is the fact that humans *produce* the material necessities of life. To survive, humans need to provide certain elementary material necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, and what is unique about the human species is how these basic material needs are met (Marx and Engels [1845], 1973: 42, 48). Non-human animals simply take what they find in nature or use what nature provides in the immediate environment, whereas humans actively and deliberately go about producing what they need to survive, intervening with nature to provide for the satisfaction of material needs.

Humans, through the application of our intelligence and physical capacities, alter and change nature to satisfy our needs through actions such as the domestication of animals, the creation of new plant strains,

the raising of crops, the diverting of water channels, and even the creation of new artificial products that we eat, use for travel, or clothe ourselves in. All of our basic necessities, such as food, clothing, and shelter, are the outcome or the product of humans labouring to create satisfaction for our material needs.

Productive Forces and Relations of Production

The human activity of producing the material goods, products, and services that we require for survival involves the use of technology, tools, knowledge, and skills, which Marx called *productive forces*. Marx also argued that in addition to being characterized by the use of productive forces, human productive activity is also inherently social; that is, it involves other humans (Marx and Engels [1845], 1973: 43, 50). His materialist method proceeds from these assumptions to provide a way of understanding human society. He argued that if we want to understand human beings and human society we must investigate and understand how the production of society's material necessities is organized. We must examine the productive forces that are in existence at a particular moment in time as well as how material production is socially organized. He referred to this last point as the social relations of production.

The nature of the productive processes is determined by both the level of development of the productive forces and the nature of the *social relations of production*, that is, the patterns of ownership use and control of the productive forces. The nature of the economic institutions is of fundamental or prime importance in influencing the nature and character of the other social institutions. The character and shape of the various institutional orders - the family, polity, education, religion - are fundamentally influenced by the nature of the productive arrangements.

A substantial debate has emerged about just how much emphasis Marx put on this influence. Some theorists have argued, for example, that Marx advocated an economic-determinist position, meaning that the economy or economic institutions determined all other aspects of a society. Although Marx may not have advocated such a strong position, the essence of the materialist position is that economic institutions are the most important factor in a society's general shape and character. The various other institutional orders in turn have reciprocal influences on each other and the economy; but these reciprocal influences are not of the same magnitude as the influence of material production over the whole (Marx [1857], 1973: 83-100).

Marx's Method Applied

The critical dimension of Marx's work is not necessarily found in his materialist approach, but rather in the outcome of his application of this approach to an analysis of capitalist society. Marx spent a major portion of his life engaged in a systematic and critical examination of the nature of material production and distribution within capitalist society. The major product of this work was his three-volume book called *Capital*.

Among Marx's essential conclusions concerning the social relations of production in capitalist society was the argument that capitalist society is by necessity a class society. The class structure of capitalist society is, Marx argued, based on the specific social relations of production that characterize the society. The class relations in a capitalist society are based on people's different structural relations to the forces of production, that is, their position in the economic institutions. This means that there are some people who own, operate, and control the factories, mills, mines, land, and other facilities that produce material wealth, while there are other people who do not. Those in structural positions of ownership receive income by virtue of that ownership, while those who do not own productive resources are forced to sell their capacity to work, that is their labour power, in order to survive.

According to Marx, the class structure of capitalist society is also characterized by relations of economic domination and subordination: some people own and control the major production resources in the economy while others do not have a share in the ownership of or any control over economic resources. For Marx, an analysis of class was essential for understanding the general structures of capitalist society.

Relations of Domination and Power

Marx linked the existence of classes, based on different economic positions, with the existence of ideological domination. Here *ideology* refers to sets of ideas or beliefs that justify or legitimate the social structures and arrangements of capitalist society. It was in connection with a consideration of how certain sets of values, norms, ideas, or beliefs come to be accepted that Marx made his famous statement that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx and Engels [1845], 1973: 64). By arguing that there are relations of ideological domination and manipulation, Marx was attempting to illustrate the pervasiveness of relations of domination within capitalist societies. The ruling class attempts to influence all aspects of the social structure, including the very way people think.

Marx also linked economic power and economic domination to political domination. Although he made several different arguments

about the precise way in which economic and political power are linked, the key point for us here is his argument that the presence of overwhelming economic power in the hands of one class makes authentic democracy impossible. This is because the class with economic power is always able to influence the government and the state to ensure that the political order acts in its long-term interests.

What we find, then, in the work of Marx is an approach that is materialist in its general orientation. Marx suggested that if we want to understand human beings within a capitalist society or the overall structures of a capitalist society, we must begin our examination with a consideration of how material production is organized. Such an approach leads to more questions. What level of technological development has taken place? Who owns, controls, and directs the use of productive forces? The answers provide essential clues for understanding the entire social structure. In other words, an analysis of the economic or material basis of a society becomes a point of departure for understanding the rest of society, a master key that helps open a series of other doors in our exploration of social complexities.

In his basic assumptions regarding the nature of reality itself, Marx's thought was very much influenced by the German philosopher Frederick Hegel (1770-1831), who produced one of the most complex and comprehensive philosophical systems ever formulated. There was one key assumption of Hegel's that Marx held firmly to. For Hegel, and thus for Marx, an essential characteristic or attribute of the universe was constant change. Everything in the universe is in a constant process of change, development, and transformation, of unfolding, a process guided by the internal logic and structures of the phenomena themselves. Marx assumed that the social scientist must take this basic fact into account when examining and explaining a given phenomenon.

Emile Durkheim

The ideas and work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) were very much an extension of the project initiated by Comte. More specifically, Durkheim was attempting to establish the scientific legitimacy of the new discipline of sociology, and he wanted to use that new discipline to assist in the establishment and maintenance of social order. The persistent issue of social order and stability had continued to be of importance in Europe and France during his era. Durkheim was concerned that not only did society seem to be devastated by conflict, but that this situation was also being described as normal by Marx and his followers, who argued that the capitalist system was

conflict and crisis. In a fundamental way he set out to develop both an alternative to the Marxian, materialist approach to the study of society and an alternative approach to the study of capitalist or, to use his phrase, industrial society.

The Division of Labour

One of Durkheim's most important books, *The Division of Labour in Society*, illustrates these two related objectives. Durkheim discusses and presents an approach to understanding human society, and in so doing he attempts to illustrate the nature of sociological analysis. The book examines the transition from pre-industrial to industrial society, although his specific focus is the role of moral codes and belief systems in social structures and changes. Durkheim seeks to demonstrate that the basis of social order is to be found in society's moral codes, by which he means belief systems, value systems, and normative orientations. As a society evolves, changes, and develops the basis of social order, its moral codes can change, and there can be periods of conflict as the new moral codes or belief systems develop. Over time there will be a tendency for order to return as the new belief systems become accepted and internalized within the population.

An Emerging Functionalist Approach

In his effort to understand how society works, Durkheim adopted and developed the organic analogy, making the role of functional analysis much more explicit. *Functional analysis* is a mode of thought that seeks to explain the parts of a system in terms of the overall needs of the system and the particular need that each of the parts or components deals with or solves.

The survival of an organic system such as the human body requires that a number of basic problems or needs be successfully solved or satisfied. In the human body there are specialized structures, such as the various organs, that meet these various needs. One way, for example, of explaining a human heart is to refer to its function as a pump that ensures the circulation of blood throughout the organic system. Similarly, the lungs and stomach could be explained by referring to the functions they perform for the entire body. Understood in this manner, the human body is a system with a series of basic needs that must be met if it is to survive. Each of the organs that make up the body performs a specialized function, allowing the entire system to continue to survive.

When this mode of analysis, called *functionalism*, is applied to human society, it holds that we should seek to understand the various aspects or components of a social system in terms of the functions they perform

for the social whole. For instance, in his study of the division of labour, Durkheim announced that he would look at the division of labour by exploring the function it performs (Durkheim, 1933: 49).

One problem that social systems face, which an organic system does not, is social order. Social order was an acute problem for many of the classical sociological thinkers because they were operating in an era in which the transformation from the old feudal order to the new capitalist system had only recently occurred. The feudal system had been characterized by the existence of a widely accepted set of moral beliefs providing the basis of social stability. In the feudal system tradition was much more important and individuals tended to view themselves as one part of a larger God-given whole. In the emerging modern market system, individuals were no longer connected to each other by traditional bonds and ties, and some thinkers were concerned about how social order and stability would be assured. Durkheim eventually concluded that within the new society a situation similar to the one that prevailed in feudal society would eventually develop. That is, a new set of moral codes or beliefs would indeed emerge, and although the content of this new moral code would be different, its function would be the same: the new moral code would provide a social cement to hold the society together.

Durkheim thus provided an alternative view of society and an alternative approach for society compared to the one posited by Marx. A materialist would argue that economic order is at the core of society. The economic order, Marx argued, is the most important factor in shaping and influencing the structures of a society. For Durkheim the value system is the most important factor. The character and structure of a society will be, in a fundamental manner, determined by the nature of its moral codes, belief systems, and normative orientations.

One of Durkheim's essential tasks was to establish the legitimacy and value of the sociological approach. It was important, he maintained, to view social phenomena and processes as social and not individual. To illustrate this point he engaged in an extensive study of what many thought was the ultimate individualist act, suicide, intending to show how sociology could cast light on even this human extreme.

Suicide

The book *Suicide* ([1897], 1995) is perhaps Durkheim's best-known work. As a result of his investigation of the phenomenon, Durkheim concluded that suicide was not simply an individual act understandable in psychological terms. A person is, Durkheim suggested, connected to society through a series of bonds that regulate conduct and aspirations and provide purposes and ideals. If these bonds are

weakened and the individual is not sufficiently integrated into society, that person could be prone to one of three types of suicide. First, when a person does not have firm bonds or connections to society, the act of suicide is caused by egoism. Second, under other circumstances a person may be too strongly integrated into society and have no autonomous self or thought for her or his self. Under such circumstances the person could commit altruistic suicide, which involves giving one's life for the collectivity, as in the case of a soldier who willingly throws himself on a bomb to save his comrades. Third, Durkheim identified a type of suicide that tends to occur when society as a whole has a weakened moral code. He characterized a society lacking a strong system of beliefs and values to hold it together as being in a condition of anomie. Under such circumstances people do not feel firm anchoring bonds with the social structure, and as a result anomie suicide can occur.

According to Durkheim, then, there are sociological explanations for many of the events and processes that we assume are individual acts and processes. As a discipline sociology focuses on the study of the social forces and processes that have an impact on individuals and influence their behaviour.

The Study of the Social

Whether he was studying the moral codes that change as the division of labour develops, the role of religion, or social factors related to the levels of suicide, Durkheim insisted that those social forces and processes, which he called social facts, were real and subject to scientific study. In a book that amounts to an instruction manual for sociologists, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he wrote: "The first and most fundamental rule is: *Consider social facts as things*" ([1895], 1964: 14; emphasis in original). A *social fact* is something that has an impact on an individual's "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling" and is "external to the individual and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him" (3). Elsewhere in the same book he stated: "A social fact is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals" (10). If we find, for example, that someone's religious values cause her or him to act in certain ways, we would have to recognize religion as a social fact and subject it to sociological investigation, an activity that Durkheim in fact spent much of his life doing.

Durkheim made a systematic attempt to develop an approach that would provide an alternative to both Marxism and the various other theories that characterized the social sciences of his day, including those offered in psychology. While Marx and Durkheim provided quite

different approaches to understanding society, each introduced a kind of set of instructions about how we can at least begin to undertake social analysis.

The decentring of the subject

Although the phrase 'the decentring of the subject' has come to be peculiarly associated with structuralism and post-structuralism, the ideas involved derive from wider sources. As structuralist and post-structuralist authors themselves are fond of pointing out, psychoanalysis already showed the ego not to be master in its own home, its characteristics only being uncovered via a detour through the unconscious. Although this was not the interpretation which Sartre made, Heidegger's writings from *Being and Time* onwards can be taken to assert the primacy of being over consciousness.²³ Moreover, there is more than a diffuse connection between Freud, Heidegger and Nietzsche. Indeed, of course, the writings of each of these authors tend to figure prominently in the work of those associated with post-structuralism. This having been said, it is evident that we can discern the origins of the notion of the 'decentred subject' in Saussure.

According to Saussure, language is a system of signs, constituted by differences, with an arbitrary relation to objects. If this includes objects in the external world, it also must embrace the characteristics of the producer of language — the speaker. Just as the meaning of 'tree' is not the object tree, so the meaning of terms that refer to human subjectivity, most particularly the 'I' of the thinking or acting subject, cannot be the states of consciousness of that subject. Like any other term in a language, I is only constituted as a sign in virtue of its differences from 'you', 'we', 'they', etc. Since the I has sense only in virtue of being an element in an 'anonymous' totality, there can be no question of according it some distinctive philosophical privilege. In Saussure this idea is not developed in a direct way; moreover Saussure's own views are somewhat confusing in the light of the persistence of a certain mentalism in his writings. It was therefore left to others to develop what Saussure left largely implicit, and they did not hesitate to do so; there is probably no theme which more persistently appears in the literature of structuralism and post-structuralism.

Levi-Strauss has written less in the explicit way about the-decentring of the subject than have most of his successors. Nonetheless in certain respects his writings have been the main mediating link between Saussure and criticisms of 'humanism' in post-structuralist philosophy. Referring to his analysis of myths, Levi-Strauss observes in a celebrated statement that he claims to show 'not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact'; or again: 'myths signify the mind which evolves them by making use of the world of which it is itself a part'.²⁴ There is

²³ Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978. ²⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss: *The Raw and the Cooked*. London: Cape, 1969, pp. 12 and 341.

no 'I think' in this characterization of human mind. The unconscious categories of mind are the constitutive backdrop against which sentiments of selfhood exist. Consciousness is made possible by Structures of mind not immediately available to it.

The decentring of the subject emerges in various guises in the post-structuralist literature. In Foucault's discussion of the beginnings and end of the 'age of man' it is primarily a set of historical observations about the development of Western philosophy and of Western culture as a whole. In Barthes, it is a series of claims about the nature of authors in relation to their texts. In Lacan, it is part of an attempt to rework the main concepts of psychoanalysis, giving of course especial attention to the idea that the unconscious exemplifies certain features of language. All these clearly share in common a critical attitude towards Cartesianism and to every philosophy (such as certain versions of phenomenology) which treats consciousness as a datum upon which the foundations of claims to knowledge may somehow be established. 'I think, therefore I am' is disqualified on a number of grounds. The T is not immediately available to itself, deriving its identity as it does from its involvement in a system of signification. The T is not the expression of some core of continuous selfhood that is its basis. The 'being' suggested in the 'I am' is not given via the capability of the subject to use the concept T. What Lacan calls the 'discourse of the Other' is taken to be the source both of the capability of the subject to employ T and the assertion of existence in 'I am'. As Lacan puts it: 'the Other is, therefore, the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks to him who hears, that which is said by the one being already the reply, the other deciding to hear it whether the one has or has not spoken.'²⁵

All the above authors agree upon the irrelevance of the author to the interpretation of texts. The writer is not a presence somehow to be uncovered behind the text. Just as the primacy accorded to the author is an historical expression of the individualism of the Age of Man, so the T of the author is a grammatical form rather than a flesh-and-blood agent. Since the text is organized in terms of the internal play of signifiers, what its originator or originators intended to put into it is more or less irrelevant to our understanding of it. Authors are to be found everywhere in their texts and consequently nowhere; as Barthes puts it: 'a text is ... a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of', p. 453.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan: *Merits*. London: Tavistock, 1977

writings, none of them original, blend and clash'²⁶ Once more, of course, this is not a conclusion which is specifically the province of structuralism or post-structuralism. The view of the 'autonomy' of texts reached by Gadamer, drawing primarily upon Heidegger, is in some respects directly comparable with that reached within the French traditions of thought.²⁷ In neither case is it believed that the author has some kind of privileged relation to his or her text. Both textual analysis and literary criticism therefore must break in a clear-cut fashion with 'intentionalist' perspectives.

The theme of the decentring of the subject is without doubt one which must be taken seriously by anyone interested in modern philosophy or social theory. But while the basic perspective surely must be accepted, the particular mode in which it is elaborated within structuralism and post-structuralism remains defective. To reject the idea that consciousness, whether consciousness of self or the sensory registering of the external world, can provide a foundation for knowledge, is to participate in one of the major transitions in modern [philosophy]. Those forms of philosophy, and therefore modes of social analysis based on them, which presume an unmediated access to consciousness are by now thoroughly discredited. Since some schools of philosophical thought, most notably phenomenology, have been closely associated with such philosophical standpoints, the rejection of those standpoints unavoidably compromises those schools of thought also. But structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of the decentring of the subject are inevitably closely tied to the versions of language and the unconscious associated with structuralist linguistics and its influence. The detour needed to recover the 'I' is not only taken very largely through language, but is in addition filtered through a particular theory of language as well. If we regard language as situated in social practices, and if we reject the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious followed by the structuralist and post-structuralist authors, we reach a different conception of the human subject — as agent. Again, this is a theme I shall pursue in what follows later.

²⁶ Roland Barthes: 'The death of the author', in *Image-Music-Text*. Glasgow: Foritana, 1977, p. 146.

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1975.

WITTGENSTEIN AND CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

I Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein did not, in his main philosophical works, write about moral, political or cultural issues. However, his more 'personal' writings, posthumously collected in *Culture and Value*, show that he was in fact profoundly concerned with just these issues. It is entirely in keeping with his philosophy that such matters should not be addressed *philosophically* - which is not to say that he did not think that deliberation on them could not be improved by overcoming certain deeply entrenched confusions on what philosophy is and what it can be expected to do.

Wittgenstein's philosophy, then, does not have any particular connection with social and political issues. Nevertheless, a number of social and political theorists have claimed to perceive, or sought to establish, a Wittgensteinian social/political theory (for example Winch [1958] 1990; Danford 1978; Rubinstein 1981; Bloor 1983; Easton 1983; Schatzki 1996). However, I have no wish to construct a new 'Wittgensteinian critical social theory'. On the contrary, I regard the idea of a Wittgensteinian *theory* (of anything) as irreparably oxymoronic. But I am, like Wittgenstein, very much interested in social, political and cultural issues.

This book is written from the perspective of having attempted to learn from Wittgenstein's critique of philosophy and, in the light of that critique, examining how contemporary 'post-positivist/empiricist' theorists set about constructing a critical theory of modern social and political life. I focus upon 'critical social theory', which amounts, if not to a new paradigm, to a substantial 'new consensus' at least, in social, political and sociological theory. Critical social theory, as I characterise it, is represented pre-eminently by Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas and Roy Bhaskar - each one of whom has attempted to assimilate to their own theoretical perspective what they take to be Wittgenstein's most important philosophical insights. Although there are of course considerable differences between each of these theorists, they manifest significant similarities and a common purpose. Part of my aim will be to identify and exhibit this common ground.

I find that critical social theory embodies very similar confusions to those that Wittgenstein identified in professional philosophical practice. I will endeavor to show how Wittgenstein's critique of philosophy can be a valuable resource for revealing the incoherence and impotence of contemporary critical social theory. And I will argue that the central 'Idea' of critical social theory - that social and political criticism requires a foundational theory of individual and

social 'ontology' — is a pseudo-scientific myth which they have erected upon the ruins of the old, now discredited, positivist conception of social science. Whilst my critique is directed at 'critical social theory' as a 'new consensus' in social and political theory, it will be prosecuted largely through detailed analyses and 'deconstructions' of the central theoretical propositions of each of the aforementioned theorists.

In the remainder of this chapter I will outline my basic approach and attitude towards Wittgenstein's philosophy and adumbrate the main features of critical social theory, as I understand it.

II Wittgenstein: against theory

It is not my intention to provide a wholly 'new' reading or interpretation of Wittgenstein; indeed, for reasons which Wittgenstein himself espoused, I believe that there can be no such thing as 'a correct interpretation' which somehow captures what Wittgenstein really meant? Rather, I want to propose that there are, broadly, two contrasting attitudes which can be assumed towards Wittgenstein's later philosophy, especially that of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The two attitudes involve either: (a) treating Wittgenstein's philosophy as a radically new method for providing a more accurate picture of certain phenomena (for example the nature of meaning, mental states, rule-following action, etc.) than traditional philosophical perspectives; or (b) accepting Wittgenstein's (1968: §109) statement that 'we may not advance any kind of theory.³ There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation.' In my view, these two attitudes are mutually exclusive - one cannot assert both that one should refrain from postulating explanatory theories and claim to be able to provide a more accurate picture of some phenomenon of interest.

Because of this conflict many theorists have chosen to ignore, or to de-emphasise, Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical stance. It is just this option that critical social theorists have taken - they have attempted to extract philosophical theses and 'ontological' insight from Wittgenstein's philosophy whilst rejecting his anti-theoretical stance as a disposable anti-scientific prejudice. Nor is it only social theorists who adopt this attitude towards Wittgenstein's philosophy; many, perhaps most, Wittgensteinian philosophers do so also, to varying degrees, though they rarely announce that this is what they are doing, and often seem to be unaware that they are doing it. My own approach to Wittgenstein's philosophy, by contrast, is to take his anti-theoretical injunctions seriously. In consequence of this, my critique of critical social theory will not be based upon any allegedly superior 'Wittgensteinian social theory'. I shall follow Wittgenstein in not claiming to be in possession of any special insight into (social and political) reality.

WITTGENSTEIN AND CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

I referred above to two 'attitudes' towards Wittgenstein's philosophy because I do not want to claim that either is an 'interpretation' as such. Rather, the attitudes are better characterised as dispositional or presuppositional orientations that constitute a framework within which interpretation takes place. Moreover, I do not think that Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical recommendations can *he justified argu-mentatwely* — at least not by conventionally accepted standards of philosophical argumentation. Any attempt to do so seems doomed to founder on self-referential paradox. Wittgenstein himself, anyway, did not attempt to argue for, or justify, his stance - as can be seen from the above quotation. His mode of expression utilises sweeping rhetorical nourishes; he once said (Wittgenstein 1970: 28), quite openly, that he was 'making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another'.

How could one set about proving that there cannot be a successful, informative or authentic philosophical theory? For a start, wouldn't one have to specify precisely what one means by 'theory' - which activities do, and which do not, count as instances of 'theory'? In other words one would need a *theory* of 'theory' - which would, of course, be self-defeating. Perhaps more to the point, one would have to claim to have a more accurate insight into the true nature of a phenomenon in order to be able to say *why* that phenomenon cannot be understood theoretically. In which case, one would be claiming to see, or know, more than any theory of that phenomenon could provide. But then wouldn't that 'seeing' or 'knowing' just be a *better* kind of theory than that which one rejects? These problems will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

In spite of myself, I have already been speaking too generally. Although Wittgenstein summarily renounces '*any kind of theory*', and advocates doing 'away with *all* explanation' (my emphases), he is, I contend, primarily concerned with a particular *kind* of theoretical explanation. In *Philosophical Investigations* he is preoccupied with what he calls 'pictures' of various phenomena.

Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* with an account of 'a particular picture of the essence of human language' (Wittgenstein 1968: §1). This picture has exercised enormous influence on philosophers, from Plato to Wittgenstein himself in his early work; I will return to an analysis of it in the following chapter. A philosophical picture, in Wittgenstein's sense, is a theoretical representation which has lost its representational status and has been reified into a peculiarly compelling portrayal of the essence of some phenomenon. Such pictures are really only metaphors, analogies, models and representations, but they are experienced as knowledge of the essence of reality-in-itself: 'we predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it' (*ibid.*: §104). The compulsion is psychological as well as intellectual. When transfixed by a philosophical picture of some phenomenon - such as, for example, the nature of 'mind', 'consciousness', 'self', 'language', etc. - we feel as though we can see *directly* (not just 'theoretically') how these things *must* be, inherendy, in and of themselves.

Many of the 'pictures' which occupy Wittgenstein's attention are not really *pictures* in the usual sense - they are reified representations of states of affairs

which cannot really be pictured at all. Or, rather, what can be pictured is just an aspect, or part of the whole phenomenon, which somehow seems to stand for such complex phenomena as 'language', 'mind', 'self', etc. Hence his critique is directed towards metonymical as well as metaphorical pictures. For example, a physical fact, such as 'the brain is located in the head', can be pictured unproblematically. But phenomena to do with mind and consciousness, which are not physical (at least not in the way that the brain is), cannot be represented pictorially - though it often seems otherwise because we are confronted by 'a picture which forces itself on us at every turn' (ibid.: §425). In this case, 'the brain' serves metonymically as a picture of mind and consciousness.

One of Wittgenstein's primary aims, in *Philosophical Investigations*, is to identify some of the most prominent, deeply entrenched, beguiling pictures which purport to reveal the real essence of 'language', 'meaning', 'understanding', etc.; 'a picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably' (ibid.: §115). Having identified and described these pictures, Wittgenstein goes on to show how insidiously misleading they are when it comes to thinking philosophically.

Our 'ordinary language' is, of course, heavily and unavoidably 'pictorial', metaphorical and metonymical. Wittgenstein does not suggest that there is anything wrong or unfortunate about this - on the contrary, 'we are not striving after an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us' (ibid.: §98). However, Wittgenstein believes that most professional philosophers are constitutionally committed to the use of reified, pictorial modes of representation - forms of thought that convey a spurious and deluded impression of quasi-scientific discovery and revelation. Such philosophers are self-deluded victims of 'grammatical illusions', and a 'misunderstanding of the logic of language' (ibid.: §§110, 93). Wittgenstein's identification and analysis of a range of deeply entrenched metaphysical pictures, which are rooted in a variety of philosophical discourses, can be seen as a kind of ideology-critique. Or, as Wittgenstein himself describes his method, it is a kind of philosophical therapy (see Bouveresse 1995; also chapter 2, section III). This therapeutic method is called for because of the peculiar 'depth' (Wittgenstein 1968: §111) of entrenchment and compelling force of so many of the dominant pictures in philosophical discourse.

Wittgenstein makes no attempt to replace the metaphysical pictures that he deconstructs with new, improved, Wittgensteinian ones. His admonitions on theory, explanation and generalisation prohibit him from any such course — though as I said before, many post-Wittgensteinian philosophers have failed to see or acknowledge this. I shall follow Wittgenstein, in that my critique of critical social theory neither proceeds from, nor results in, any allegedly superior theoretical picture of social and political life. I will elaborate upon

Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical stance at greater length and detail in the next chapter, but for now I proceed with a basic adumbration of the main features of critical social theory.

III Critical social theory: the new consensus

The so-called 'founding fathers' of modern sociology - Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim - produced a synthesis of various subjects, including philosophy, history, legal studies, anthropology, politics and economics. They can be, and often are, described as 'social theorists'. However, the kind of social theory with which I am concerned in this book is a quite recent development; it is a type of social theory that I regard as markedly different from its classical predecessor (mostly for the worst, I believe, but that is not my concern here). Critical social theory can be located somewhere between the philosophy of social science and social science itself. Whereas the philosophy of social science deals with epistemological questions, such as the epistemic status of 'law', 'truth', 'explanation', 'causation', etc., the main activity of critical social theorists is the construction of theoretical representations of the structures, rules, mechanisms and powers which (so they claim) constitute society, individual action and subjectivity.

I have chosen to focus on Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar as the foremost exemplars of critical social theory - but the latter term refers to a widely prevalent *mode of* social and political theory, not just to these three individuals. Critical social theory represents what I - alluding to Giddens's (1984: xv xx) account of the demise of the positivistic 'orthodox consensus' in social theory call the 'new consensus'. Critical social theory has reached such prominence that considerable theoretical work is devoted to its exegesis, elaboration and reconstruction. Some of this work has been critical, but very little, if any, has questioned - as I intend to do - the basic assumptions and presuppositions of the 'Idea' of a critical social theory.

Giddens's (1984: xvi-xvii) definition of 'social theory' in the following quotation encapsulates what I mean by 'critical social theory':

I use the term 'social theory' to encompass issues that I hold to be the concern of all the social sciences. These issues are to do with the nature of human action and the acting self; with how interaction should be conceptualised and its relation to institutions; and with grasping the practical connotations of social analysis.

The purpose of my appellation 'critical social theory' — which is based on the theorists' own self-descriptions - is to distinguish contemporary from classical social theory, and also to advert to the 'new consensus'. The term 'critical social theory' is frequently deployed by Habermas, who uses it to differentiate his theoretical practice from that of Frankfurt School 'Critical Theory' (see chapter 8). Similarly, Bhaskar calls his philosophy of social science and his social theory 'critical realism'. And although Giddens (1982a: 15) uses the more neutral-sounding term 'social theory', he nevertheless asserts that 'social theory is inevitably critical theory'. Each of these theorists postulates an intimate relationship between critical theory and accurate theoretical depiction of individual subjectivity, action and social organisation.

As I said before, there are, of course, a number of important differences

between these theorists, and they have occasionally criticised one another, but I want to focus on their similarities and common ground. Wittgenstein's (1968: §66) notion of 'family resemblances' is an apt means of characterising the relationships of similarity and difference which pertain between Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar. Wittgenstein suggests that, in the case of 'family resemblance' terms, there are a 'network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing', and it is this which relates the range of different phenomena that are called by the same name — not one essence that they all possess (*ibid.*, and see chapter 2, section IV). Applying this notion to critical social theory, it will be seen that, for example, the social 'ontologies' of Giddens and Bhaskar are much the same in key respects (see chapters 4 and 6), whereas Habermas's is somewhat different, though similar in general orientation (see chapter 8). On the other hand, Giddens and Habermas place much greater stress on the constitutive role of language in psychological and social life than does Bhaskar. But then Bhaskar and Habermas are quite favourably disposed to historical materialism and the notion of evolutionary social change, whereas Giddens is outrightly hostile to these perspectives. I could go on in the same vein, but instead turn now to issues on which all three are in substantial agreement. The main features of critical social theory that I want to highlight are as follows.

Firstly, each theorist upholds the Enlightenment faith in the possibility and desirability of objectively valid scientific knowledge, which includes social scientific knowledge. Thus, in addition to its departure from classical social theory, as I noted above, critical social theory is vehemently opposed to contemporary postmodernist and post-structuralist social theories. Whilst acknowledging certain important insights contained in such theories, critical social theorists reject the radical relativism that these theories embrace. However, the objectivity to which critical social theorists subscribe is a 'hermeneutical' rather than a positivist or empiricist naturalism (see chapter 3, section VI).

Secondly, critical social theory is extraordinarily eclectic in its attempt to synthesise and reconcile a bewildering array of diverse and often contradictory schools and types of social theory and philosophy. In addition to classical social theory (Marx, Weber, Durkheim), both 'hermeneutical social theory' (Winch, Goffman, Schutz, Garfinkel) and 'continental hermeneutics' (Gadamer, Heidegger) have proven to be particularly attractive and alluring to critical social theorists. Philosophically, critical social theorists have sought to reconcile empiricism and rationalism to produce new theories of knowledge and consciousness (see chapter 4). And as I mentioned earlier, critical social theory has been heavily influenced by Wittgenstein and post-Wittgensteinian philosophy. A large part of the meaning of the term 'critical' in critical social theory consists in a 'critical' reformulation and

recombination of these, and many other, social theories and philosophies.

Thirdly, critical social theorists reject positivism and empiricism as a false and outmoded philosophy and epistemology respectively. Positivism and empiricism are also condemned for providing theoretical legitimation for manipulative and exploitative social sciences and social technologies. Positivist and empiricist social theories, particularly those of the classic social theorists, are attacked for promulgating a picture of individuals as passive subjects of deterministic social systems and historical forces. In this sense, critical social theory continues in the tradition of the Critical Theory inaugurated by Adorno and Horkheimer, where the latter regarded positivism and empiricism as the ideology of 'instrumental reason' and 'reified' society (see chapter 8).

Fourthly, critical social theorists conceive of their activities as a kind of Lockean theoretical 'under-labouring' for social science (Bhaskar 1978: 10 n.8). This theoretical labour is often described by Bhaskar and Giddens as the elucidation of individual and social 'ontology', and by Habermas as the 'rational reconstruction' (1990: 31) of communicative action and social systems. The two descriptions amount to basically the same kind of programme, but I will mainly use the term 'ontology' to cover both. The aim of ontological elucidation is to provide a highly generalised theoretical account of the fundamental nature of individuals (subjectivity, action, agency, knowledge, etc.) and social organisation (structure, system, mechanisms, institutions, etc.). These theoretical representations are cast in a universal and transcendental form; as Habermas (1989: 19) puts it: 'analysis aims at structures that, in contrast to the historical shapes of particular lifeworlds and life-forms, are put forward as invariant'. Ontological elucidation is supposed to identify the structures, mechanisms, powers, states and processes which, it is claimed, underlie and generate individual action and social organisation as such. The powers, mechanisms and structures postulated in these theories of ontology transcend sensory awareness or detectability, and are inferred, or 'reconstructed', on the basis of being necessary to explain theoretically the known and observable features of society and individuality."¹

Fifthly, critical social theorists have been strongly influenced by post-empiricist and post-positivist philosophy of science (developed by Popper, Kuhn, Polanyi, Harre, Hesse and others), and endeavour to apply the lessons (as they see them) of that movement to social and political theory. Each of my chosen critical social theorists advocates (post-empiricist) realism with respect to the ontological status of the theoretical entities that they conceptualise. This categorisation, I presume, applies uncontroversially to Bhaskar and Giddens,⁵ but it may be more contentious for Habermas. Because of his 'intersubjective' conception of knowledge and his 'discourse theory of truth' (1993: 162), Habermas is not usually considered to be a 'realist' - Bhaskar (1993: 430), for example, objects to Habermas's alleged lack of realism and 'disdain for ontology'. However, in spite of this, I offer two major justifications — one

negative and one positive - for my categorisation:

1 Realism does not necessarily entail any particular theory of truth; as Searle (1996: 154) — himself a realist - points out: 'realism is consistent with any theory of truth because it is a theory of ontology and not of the meaning of "true"'. Indeed, Bhaskar (1986: 6) is of the same view: 'realism is not a theory of knowledge or truth, but of *being*'.

2. Habermas' social theory, just like those of Bhaskar and Giddens, consists essentially in a 'theory of ontology'. His theory of communicative action entails the 'ontological presuppositions' of three interlinked and interdependent 'worlds', namely (i) the 'objective world' of external reality; (ii) the intersubjective 'common social world'; and (iii) the individual's 'own subjective world' (Habermas 1987: 312-14).

Hence I categorise Habermas as a (post-empiricist) realist on the basis of his theoretical interest in ontology. It is true that his theory of ontology is somewhat different from Bhaskar's (though they share the same tripartite structure) and Giddens's - but that does not vitiate its status as a theory of ontology, nor does it make it an anti- or non-realist philosophy. Moreover, Habermas uses the same metaphorical language of 'ontological depth' as Bhaskar and Giddens, as is evident in his assertion that:

rational reconstructions. . . , explicate only in the essentialist sense; if they are true, they have to correspond precisely to the rules that are operationally effective in the object domain ~ that is, to the rules that actually determine the production of surface structures. (Habermas 1979: 16)

The basic philosophical attitude of each of these critical social theorists is that epistemological questions are to be subordinated to what there is to know. They believe that the quest for a foundationalist epistemology is an inevitable product of the scepticism intrinsic to empiricist philosophy.

Having outlined the main features of critical social theory somewhat 'descriptively', I will now adopt a rather more evaluative stance, which introduces what I consider to be its central incoherence.

Perhaps the single greatest bequest of post-empiricist philosophy of science to critical social theory is the view that all knowledge-claims are irreparably fallible. But a perverse and unintended consequence of the post-empiricists' doctrine of fallibilism is that it has increased the (ontological) certainty of critical social theorists. Thus critical social theorists embrace both epistemological relativism and ontological realism, and indeed maintain that the latter necessitates the former (Bhaskar 1989a: 57; Giddens 1976: 145). This means that critical social theorists claim that we can know 'ontologically' that social organisation and individual subjectivity is constituted by certain structures, rules, mechanisms, powers, etc., of universal scope, whilst acknowledging that

any particular account of this ontology is always (epistemologically) fallible and contingent. Thus, for example, Bhaskar (1978: 29 — original emphasis) asserts, in ontological voice: 'given that science does or could occur, the world must be a certain way . . . that the world is structured and differentiated can be established by philosophical argument'. But he also insists, now speaking epistemologically, that any knowledge-claims regarding particular entities must be regarded as contingent and fallible.⁶ Habermas exhibits exactly the same attitude, claiming that we can identify certain 'unavoidable', 'inescapable', and 'universal' conditions of speech and action - but that any particular theoretical representation of these abstract conditions and mechanisms is equally unavoidably fallible. (See chapter 8, section Vi for further critical analysis of Habermas's epistemological position.)

In my view, this conjunction of epistemological relativism and ontological realism is a 'conjuring trick' (Wittgenstein 1968: §308) whereby critical social theorists try to have the best of both worlds. The 'conjuring trick' is performed largely by declaring that ontological theory-construction must have priority over epistemological misgivings. Thus Giddens (1984: xx) warns that 'concentration upon epistemological issues draws attention away from the more "ontological" concerns of social theory', and he counsels against 'becoming preoccupied with epistemological disputes'. In similar vein, Bhaskar (1978: 43) offers the following maxim: 'to be a fallibilist about knowledge, it is necessary to be a realist about things. Conversely, to be a sceptic about things is to be a dogmatist about knowledge.'

Because fallibilism extends in principle to the most (apparently) secure scientific knowledge, the abstractness, speculativeness and untestability of theories of social and individual ontology is seen to be no bar to their validity. One might, perhaps, have expected that the doctrine of fallibilism would have the opposite effect; that is, one might expect that it would make critical social theorists wary of claiming to know the fundamental nature of individual subjectivity and the underlying structure of social organisation - especially considering the spectacular lack of 'success' of the social sciences. But it is not so - critical social theory is decidedly anti-sceptical - and, I have to say, profoundly un-self-critical. Despite their professed acceptance of epistemological relativism, critical social theorists proceed as if this principle applies to all but their own theoretical pronouncements.

Each of the critical social theorists that I examine maintains that their project is 'anti-foundationalist'. However, this disavowal is predicated on the dubious assumption that foundationalism only applies to the Cartesian and Kantian quest for indubitable epistemic foundations. Critical social theorists' interpretation of the import of fallibilism therefore has the consequence of re-admitting a very close relation of foundationalism via the back door, as it were.⁷ 'Ontological realism' is, in my view, simply an updated post-Cartesian/Kantian version of traditional foundationalism - it is an 'ontological foundationalism'.

IV Wittgenstein and critical social theory

Each of the critical social theorists upon whom I focus has been strongly influenced by Wittgenstein and post-Wittgensteinian philosophy. But the attitude that they have assumed towards this philosophy is that its (considerable) value is contained in the 'ontological insight' that it affords with respect to the nature and structure of individual subjectivity and social organisation. Indeed, Wittgenstein's

Philosophy is particularly attractive to critical social theorists because it seems to

say that many perplexing philosophical problems to do with mind, self, consciousness, meaning, etc. - which have bedevilled traditional philosophy - can be treated social-theoretically. For example, Wittgenstein's famous 'rule-following' remarks are seen to exhibit insightful ontological observations - but ones which can, and need to be, greatly improved by being incorporated into the critical social theorist's own more logically rigorous and systematic social theory. Thus Wittgenstein is regarded as a social theorist manque, and his 'ontological insights' are seen as requiring theoretical clarification and reconstruction.

In sharp contrast to critical social theory, I prioritise just that side of Wittgenstein's philosophy that the former reject for being nihilistic, irrational and hence - so they believe - 'conservative' and un-critical. I will attempt to show that Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophical theory can be extended a fortiori to critical social theory. My strategy will be to tackle, in a manner similar to Wittgenstein's 'deconstructions' of the pictures which dominate traditional philosophical thought, the theoretical 'pictures' which captivate critical social theorists. Because of the peculiar nature of critical social theory, as outlined above, I refer to the pictures which constitute their theoretical systems as 'ontological pictures'. The theories on which most of my critical analyses are directed are: Giddens's theory of 'structuration' (chapter 4); Bhaskar's 'transcendental realism' and 'transformational model of social activity' (chapter 6); and Habermas's theories of 'communicative action' and 'discourse ethics' (chapter 8). In each case I identify, and 'deconstruct', the ontological pictures upon which these social theories are based.

I should stress that, in line with my approach to Wittgenstein's philosophy that I introduced above, my critique of critical social theory is an attempt to apply what I have learnt from Wittgenstein, and does not in any way invoke, imply, or presuppose an alternative 'Wittgensteinian' social or political theory.⁸ My critique operates on two levels: firstly, it is a critique of the social theory of critical social theory and, secondly, it repudiates the latter's claim to be a critical theory. I do not, as such, claim that social theory is 'impossible', or even that it is totally worthless - but I do, following Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy, advocate thoroughgoing scepticism towards the 'explanatory power' and critical efficacy of the social theory that is critical social theory. I do not measure critical social theory against some other kind of theory - rather, I judge it 'immanently' against its own standards and criteria (see chapter 2, section III).