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Sociology

Themes and
Perspectives



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Culture and identity

Introduction

The definition of culture

In the introductory chapter (see pp. 3–4) culture was defined as being the whole way of life found in a particular society. It was suggested that culture was learned and shared by members of a society. However, the concept of culture is a complicated one. In his book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams, a leading theorist of culture, claims that 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1976).

The word 'culture' has in fact been used in a number of different ways both by sociologists and in everyday conversation. All the ways in which it has been used implicitly or explicitly contrast culture with nature. The things that humans produce or do are cultural, whereas the things that exist or occur without human intervention are part of the natural world. Christopher Jencks describes culture in this sense as 'all which is symbolic: the learned ... aspects of human society' (Jencks, 1993). However, the various definitions differ over what aspects of human life and its products should be seen as part of culture.

Jencks distinguishes four main senses in which the word culture is now used:

- 1 Culture is sometimes seen as a state of mind. Someone becomes cultured if they move towards 'the idea of perfection, a goal or an aspiration of individual human achievement or emancipation'. From this perspective, culture is seen as a quality possessed by individuals who are able to gain the learning and achieve the qualities that are seen as desirable in a cultured human being. This definition is reflected in the views of writers such as Matthew Arnold (see p. 899).
- 2 The first definition is rather an elitist one in that it sees some aspects of what is human as superior to other aspects. The second definition is also elitist, but rather than seeing some *individuals* as superior to others it sees certain *societies* as superior to others. In this sense, culture is closely related to the idea of civilization. Some societies are more cultured or more civilized than others. This view of culture is closely linked to evolutionary ideas, such as those of

Herbert Spencer (see pp. 202–4) who saw Western societies as more evolved than other societies.

- 3 The third definition sees culture as 'the collective body of arts and intellectual work within any one society'. As Jencks points out, this is a fairly commonsense definition and is widely used. From this point of view, culture is to be found in theatres, concert halls, art galleries and libraries, rather than in all aspects of human social life. Culture in this sense is sometimes called **high culture**.
- 4 The final definition sees culture as 'the whole way of life of a people'. This definition of culture is adopted by Ralph Linton who says, 'The culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation' (Linton, 1945).

The fourth definition is the one most usually adopted by contemporary sociologists. Culture in this sense virtually incorporates the whole of the subject matter of sociology. Thus it is hard to see the sociology of culture as being very distinct from other areas of sociology. When the third definition is adopted it is easier to identify a distinctive area of sociology which is the sociology of culture. It includes, for example, the sociology of art, the sociology of music and the sociology of literature.

Types of culture

These definitions of culture (particularly the third and fourth) can be developed further through a brief examination of the different types of culture that have been identified by sociologists.

High culture

High culture, as mentioned above, is usually used to refer to cultural creations that have a particularly high status. They are regarded by arbiters of cultural taste as the epitome of the highest levels of human creativity. The products of long-established art forms are usually seen as examples of high culture. They include such things as opera, the work of highly regarded classical composers such as Beethoven and

Mozart, the painting of artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, and critically acclaimed literature such as the work of Shakespeare and John Milton. For many who use the term, high culture is seen as aesthetically superior to lesser forms of culture such as the next three we will consider.

Folk culture

Folk culture refers to the culture of ordinary people, particularly those living in pre-industrial societies. Dominic Strinati says that folk culture is often taken to arise 'from the grass roots, is self-created and autonomous and directly reflects the lives and experiences of the people' (Strinati, 1995). Examples of folk culture include traditional folk songs and traditional stories that have been handed down from generation to generation. Folk culture has been seen by some theorists as being less worthwhile than high culture but nevertheless as worthy of some respect. Strinati describes this view in the following way: 'folk culture can never aspire to be art, but its distinctiveness is accepted and respected'. It is at least an authentic culture and not one that is artificially created.

Mass culture

For its critics **mass culture** is seen as less worthy than folk culture. If folk culture is seen as characteristic of pre-modern, pre-industrial societies, mass culture is a product of industrial societies. Mass culture is essentially a product of the mass media, and examples include popular feature films, television soap operas and recorded pop music. As we shall see, some critics of mass culture see it as debasing for the individual and destructive of the fabric of society. If folk culture was created by ordinary people, mass culture is only consumed by them. From this viewpoint, the audience become passive members of a mass society, unable to think for themselves.

Popular culture

The term **popular culture** is often used in a similar way to the term mass culture. Popular culture includes any cultural products appreciated by large numbers of ordinary people with no great pretensions to cultural expertise: for example, TV programmes, pop music, mass-market films such as *Titanic* and the *Star Wars* series, and popular fiction such as detective stories. However, while mass culture is usually used as a pejorative term – a term of abuse – this is by no means always the case with the term popular culture. While some do see popular culture as shallow or even harmful, others, including some postmodern theorists, argue that it is just as valid and just as worthwhile as high culture.

Subculture

Finally, **subculture** is a term widely used in sociology to refer to 'groups of people that have something in common with each other (i.e. they share a problem, an interest, a practice) which distinguishes them in a significant way from other social groups' (Thornton, 1997). The term has been applied to a wide range of groups, including communities who live close together and have a shared lifestyle, youth groups who share common musical tastes and enjoy the same leisure activities (for example, ravers), ethnic groups, people who share the same religious beliefs, members of the same gang, and so on. Some theorists, particularly functionalists, have tended to emphasize the degree to which culture, in the sense of lifestyle, is shared by members of a society. Many other theorists emphasize one or more aspects of cultural pluralism or subcultural variety in society.

Identity

The definition of identity

The concept of **identity** has been defined as 'A sense of self that develops as the child differentiates from parents and family and takes a place in society' (Jary and Jary, 1991). It refers to the sense that someone has of who they are, of what is most important about them. Important sources of identity are likely to include nationality, ethnicity, sexuality (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual), gender and class. Although it is individuals who have identities, identity is related to the social groups to which the individual belongs and with which they identify. However, there is not always a perfect match between how a person thinks of themselves and how others see them. **Personal identity** may be different from **social identity**. For example, a person perceived by others to be male may see themselves as a woman trapped in a man's body.

The importance of identity

The concept of identity has become increasingly important in sociology. Early sociologists rarely used the concept, although their work often implied a theory of identity. For example, most early studies of social class in Britain tended to see class identity as central to people's sense of who they were. Studies of class consciousness (see, for example, pp. 75–89) often assumed that class identity was normally strong. They downplayed the importance of other identities such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Some sociologists believe that studies such as these operated with a modern conception of identity. People's identities were seen as fairly stable, as widely shared within social groups, and as based upon one or two key variables, such as class and nationality.

More recently, post-structuralist and postmodern theories of identity have adopted very different theories (see pp. 922–32). They tend to suggest that people's identities have many different facets, that they frequently change and can contain considerable contradictions. For example, people may act in more 'masculine' ways in some situations and more 'feminine' ways in other situations. Furthermore, the meaning of 'feminine' and 'masculine' identities has become less clearcut. There may now be many different ways to be manly or womanly, rather than just one (see, for example, pp. 191–6).

According to these sorts of perspectives, people actively create their own identities. Identities are no longer reducible simply to the social groups to which people belong. People have a great deal of choice about what social groups to join and, through shopping and other forms of consumption, people can shape and sometimes change their identities. To some writers, most individuals in contemporary societies no longer have a stable sense of identity at all – their identities are fragmented (see pp. 925–6).

Identity and culture

The concept of identity is closely related to the idea of culture. Identities can be formed through the cultures and subcultures to which people belong or in which people participate. However, different theories of identity see the relationship between culture and

identity in rather different ways. Those influenced by modern theories of culture and identity are more likely to see identity as originating in a fairly straightforward way from involvement in particular cultures and subcultures. For example, people living in Britain would be expected to have a strong sense of British identity. Theories influenced more by postmodernism tend to stress the complexity of being British and the diversity of ways in which, for example, British people from different ethnic or national origins interpret British identity.

Stephen Frosh describes the view that identity draws from culture but is not simply formed by it in the following way:

Recent sociological and psychological theory has stressed that a person's 'identity' is in fact something multiple and potentially fluid, constructed through experience and linguistically coded. In developing their identities people draw upon culturally available resources in their immediate social networks and in society as a whole. The process of identity construction is therefore one upon which the contradictions and dispositions of the surrounding socio-cultural environment have a profound impact.

Frosh, 1999, p. 413

The issue of identity will be explored in much greater depth towards the end of the chapter. First, however, we will examine a number of perspectives on culture.

Culture – functionalist perspectives

Functionalist sociologists have generally had little to say about culture in the sense of the arts, but have been interested in culture in the sense of norms, values and lifestyles. Functionalists have generally approached the issue of societal culture from an evolutionary perspective. Their emphasis has been on the changing nature of culture as society evolved. However, the first view to be considered – that of Durkheim and Mauss – tries to go back to the origins of human culture.

Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss – Primitive Classification

The need for classification

In *Primitive Classification* (1963, first published 1903) Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss considered some of the most basic questions about how human culture arises. To Durkheim and Mauss, culture only becomes

possible once humans are able to distinguish between things and classify them. At birth, humans cannot classify things and experience simply 'a continuous flow of representations'. This makes it difficult to separate one thing from another. In order to develop a culture humans have to develop a system for classifying things. Without one, they cannot make sense of the world around them.

The origin of classification systems

But where does the model on which classification is based come from? Durkheim and Mauss claimed that the model comes from the structure of society. Because social structures are based upon divisions between social groups, people begin to classify the rest of the world in terms of such divisions.

Durkheim and Mauss believed that Australian aboriginals had the simplest and most primitive societies. They considered that such societies provided important evidence about how human systems of

classification might have developed. By examining the work of other anthropologists, Durkheim and Mauss found that the Port Mackay aboriginals had perhaps the simplest classification system of all. The Port Mackay aboriginals were divided into two social groups or *moieties*. These were called the *Youngaroo* and the *Wootaroo*. Because their society was divided into two groups, they divided everything else into two groups corresponding to their moieties. For example, alligators and the sun were classified as *Youngaroo*, whereas kangaroos and the moon were *Wootaroo*.

Other aboriginal groups had more complicated systems. For example, the *Wakelbura* of Queensland classified everything into four groupings. This was because their society was divided into four groups: two moieties – the *Mallera* and *Wutaru* – each of which was subdivided into two marriage clans – the *Kurgila* and *Banbey* in the *Mallera* moiety, and the *Wongu* and *Obu* in the *Wutaru* moiety. The *Wakelbura* classification system reflects these divisions, with two primary classes of things, each of which was further subdivided into two. Furthermore, this affected even what people were allowed to eat. The *Banbey*, for example, were only allowed to eat food that was classified as *Banbey* (including kangaroos, dogs, small bees and honey).

Complex classification systems

As the complexity of societies increases, so does the complexity of classification. For example, the Zuni Sioux of North America have an eight-fold classification system based upon eight points of the compass. For example, 'the pelican, crane, grouse, sagecock, the evergreen oak, etc. are things of the north; the bear, coyote, and spring grass are things of the west'.

Although such classification systems might appear primitive, they are the basis for all classification and indeed all culture. Like much more advanced and even scientific classification systems, they describe hierarchies, establish relationships between groups of things, and organize the world to make it comprehensible. Thus all understanding is based upon social relationships. Durkheim and Mauss say:

Far from being the case ... that the social relations of men are based upon logical relations between things, in reality it is the former which have provided the prototype for the latter. ... The first logical categories were social categories; the first classes of things were classes of men.

Durkheim and Mauss, 1963, p. 82

Religion and classification

In other work, Durkheim is equally insistent on arguing that culture has a social origin. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961, first published 1912) he extended the arguments of

Primitive Classification to incorporate religion. He argued that religion is based upon a basic division of the world into the *sacred* and the *profane*. He again used the example of Australian aboriginals and advanced the argument that the totem system is concerned with the worship of society (see pp. 432–3 for a full discussion).

In simple societies, Durkheim believed that religion was the basis for the collective conscience – the shared moral beliefs and values of a society. Although Durkheim does not use the term 'culture' to refer to the collective conscience, what he describes is very similar to the way the term culture is used by some other writers. Durkheim says, 'The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the *collective* or *common* conscience' (Durkheim, 1947). As discussed in Chapter 10, Durkheim believed that the collective conscience exerts a very strong influence on people in pre-industrial societies. These societies are characterized by *mechanical solidarity*. People feel a sense of solidarity because they are similar to one another. There is little division of labour. (See Chapter 10 for further details.)

As society evolves, the division of labour becomes more specialized. People are no longer so similar to one another. However, they do depend upon one another. For example, teachers need farmers to grow food, and farmers need teachers to educate their children. Durkheim describes this situation of interdependence as *organic solidarity*. In a society of organic solidarity a collective conscience – a shared culture – is still necessary. However, the collective conscience tends to be less strong than it was under mechanical solidarity. Individuals have to be different to carry out their specialized roles. (For example, a boxer needs to be more aggressive than a nurse.)

A specialized division of labour can encourage excessive individualism (which Durkheim calls *egoism*) or even a situation of normlessness (which he calls *anomie*). Anomie can result from changes in society which disrupt existing relationships and bring existing values into question. This can lead to social problems such as a high suicide rate (see Chapter 14). Nevertheless, it is still possible for society to maintain a collective conscience. Durkheim suggests that the education system and professional associations can help to cement social solidarity amongst people in industrial societies (see Chapter 11 on education and Chapter 10 for more on professional associations).

Conclusion

To Durkheim, then, a shared culture, or collective conscience, is necessary if a society is to run smoothly. This shared culture exists over and above

the wishes and choices of individuals, and it constrains their behaviour. It is passed down from generation to generation. Durkheim says that the collective conscience 'does not change from generation to generation, but, on the contrary, it connects successive generations with one another. It is thus entirely different from particular consciences, although it can be realised only through them.' People must conform to the culture of their society if they are to avoid the risk of punishment. Although society needs a shared culture, the specialized division of labour and rapid pace of industrial societies can place it under threat and positive steps may have to be taken to support it.

Criticisms and evaluation of Durkheim

Durkheim's work has been extensively criticized. Rodney Needham questions Durkheim and Mauss's work on primitive classification on the grounds that 'there is a simple lack of correspondence between form of society and form of classification' (Needham, 1963). For example, Port Mackay moieties are actually divided into marriage clans. You would therefore expect them to adopt a four-fold classification system rather than a binary one. Durkheim and Mauss ignore this evidence because it fails to support their case.

There have also been criticisms of Durkheim's work on religion (see p. 433) and on suicide (see Chapter 14). In general, Durkheim's work has been criticized for exaggerating the extent to which human culture is determined by social structure. His work leaves little room for human creativity and does little to address subcultural differences between groups. However, Durkheim did pave the way for developing a social theory of culture, and he encouraged many later writers to examine the ways in which social factors might shape culture.

Talcott Parsons – culture and social structure

Talcott Parsons's theory of culture is integral to his theories of society as a whole. His views will therefore be discussed only briefly here, but more details can be found in other chapters (see pp. 26–7, 434–5, and Chapter 15).

Culture and the social system

In *The Social System* (1951) Parsons defined cultural objects as 'symbolic elements of the cultural tradition, expressive symbols or value patterns'. Culture therefore includes such things as the language of a society, symbols such as flags, and beliefs about right and wrong, as well as things such as the art and literature of a society. Parsons thus adopted a broad definition of culture. He distin-

guished culture from the physical environment and from the individual personality. However, it is culture that links these different elements of a social system together. Individuals can only interact socially once a culture which allows communications between them has developed. Furthermore, people interpret the physical world through the symbols, such as words, that are part of their culture. Parsons said:

a social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors ... whose relation to their situations including each other is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols.

Parsons, 1951, pp. 5–6

To Parsons, human society is not possible without a shared culture. It allows people to communicate, to understand each other and to work towards shared goals. The existence of a shared culture is a **functional prerequisite** – a basic need – of any society that is to survive. He said, 'the high elaboration of human action systems is not possible without relatively stable symbolic systems'.

Culture and socialization

Parsons and Bales (1955) argued that culture is passed on to children through socialization, particularly through primary socialization in the family (see pp. 509–10). Parsons (1951) argued that socialization allows people to learn about different statuses and roles. Statuses in society indicate to others what sort of behaviour to expect from someone. For example, pupils would expect somebody with the status of a teacher to treat them in an impartial way when marking their work. Roles, such as the roles of mother or father, carry certain expectations with them and guide people as to how they should behave in accordance with society's culture. (For a discussion of culture, status and roles, largely based upon Parsons's ideas, see pp. 3–6.)

However, Parsons and Bales did accept that culture is not simply passed down to children and never modified. Culture constrains and limits behaviour, but it can change in interaction. If it is not repeated and reinforced in actual behaviour, culture can change. Parsons and Bales said:

The common culture then acts as a control on behavior, and vice versa ... But the common culture also requires maintenance, reconstruction, and so on – it requires overt interaction in real space and time, with all the physical constrictions so imposed, in order to be built, and in order to survive and grow.

Parsons and Bales, 1955, p. 301

Culture and social change

Despite such statements, Parsons generally saw culture as slow to change. He recognized that not everyone will share exactly the same culture, but he believed that most members of society must share most aspects of any particular culture if the society is to function smoothly and survive. Like Durkheim, though, Parsons did believe that major changes in culture do take place as societies gradually evolve. In particular, Parsons argued that, as societies change from being simple to being more complex, there is a change in the values underlying the social system.

In simple societies **pattern variables A** are dominant. These are largely based upon ascription – people are evaluated and rewarded according to who they are. For example, individuals will help other people or give them a job because they are members of the same family or clan.

In more complex societies the values associated with **pattern variables B** become dominant. These are based upon achievement – people are rewarded according to what they have achieved and what they can do. Thus a person might be given a job because they have passed the necessary exams and gained relevant experience, rather than because they happen

to belong to the same family as the person making the appointment (see Chapter 15 for further details). To Parsons, societies with a culture based upon achievement are fairer and more efficient than those based upon ascription.

Criticisms and evaluation of Parsons

Parsons has often been accused of exaggerating both the extent to which contemporary societies possess a common culture and the extent to which people conform to the culture into which they are socialized. While such criticisms may be largely justified, Parsons did make it clear that he did not believe that everybody shares an identical culture. However, contemporary societies may possess such cultural diversity that they raise questions about how much culture needs to be shared. In Britain, for example, there is a great deal of ethnic, regional and religious diversity, yet British society continues to function without any signs of imminent disintegration. It may be that Parsons's views are more applicable to fairly homogeneous societies than to heterogeneous ones. If that is the case then his views cannot be applied to all social systems as he claims.

Marxist theories of culture and identity

Karl Marx on culture

Like Durkheim, Marx made little explicit use of the concept of culture. However, contained within his extensive writings there are a number of ideas that could be seen as forming a theory of culture (in the sense of the lifestyle of a society). Furthermore, Marx also developed some ideas on art and literature.

The origins of culture

Like functionalists, Marx argued that human culture has a social origin and cannot be seen as deriving directly from nature or from innate instincts in human beings. Culture comes from humanity's creation of the first societies. Unlike Durkheim, though, Marx did not see culture developing in terms of primitive classification systems that derive from social structure. Instead he believed that culture had a material origin in human labour.

As a materialist Marx believed that material circumstances and economic activity shaped human consciousness. In the *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts* (first published 1844) Marx argued that 'the animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It is its *life-activity*. Man makes his life-

activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life-activity' (quoted in Baxandall and Morawski (eds), 1974). In this passage, Marx is arguing that animals do not possess a consciousness separate from activities such as hunting or building nests. While animals produce things, they do so only to meet their immediate needs. However, humans do more than this.

Once humans get together and form social groups they engage in productive activity even when they have no need to. Marx said, 'man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. ... Man, therefore, also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty.' Because humans, once they form social groups, produce more than they need to do for simple physical survival, they begin to produce things for their aesthetic appeal. They produce things because they give pleasure rather than because they meet needs such as hunger or thirst.

To Marx, culture originates in human productive activity. As humans extend the work they do beyond their survival needs, they start to develop self-consciousness. This allows them to actively create their own culture. In *Capital* (first published

1867), Marx elaborated further on this theme. He suggested that the imagination and creativity of the human worker are qualitatively different from the mechanical behaviour of bees or other animals. He said:

the poorest architect is categorically distinguished from the best of bees by the fact that before he builds a dell in wax, he builds it in his head. The result achieved at the end of a labor process was already present at its commencement, in the imagination of the worker in its ideal form. More than merely working an alteration in the form of nature, he also knowingly works his own purposes into nature.

Quoted in Baxandall and Morawski (eds), 1974, p. 54

Alienation and culture

According to Marx, when humans live in freedom, they fulfil themselves through the creative activity of producing things using their imagination. However, problems arise when human freedom is restricted by the existence of private property. Some humans start to accumulate large amounts of private property at the expense of others, and the propertyless begin to lose their freedom. They lack the **means of production** such as the tools or the land necessary to produce enough for their own physical survival. Instead they have to work for others who do own the means of production. They lose freedom to organize their productive activity or work. They are compelled to work for the owners of the means of production in order to survive. In short, they become alienated.

As discussed elsewhere (see Chapter 10), alienation involves a sense of estrangement from the work that people do (the act of production), from other workers, from what they are producing (the end product) – because they no longer own it – and even from their own essential humanity. Alienated workers are unable to freely express their own humanity by using their creativity in their work.

Culture as ruling-class ideology

Marx developed these ideas further by claiming that in class-stratified societies culture can be seen as little more than **ruling-class ideology**. From this point of view culture is simply an expression of the distorted view of the world advanced by the dominant class. It is part of the superstructure of society. The superstructure is shaped by the economic base or infrastructure. The ruling class – the owners of the means of production – use their economic power to shape society's culture. In a famous passage in *The German Ideology* (first published 1846) Marx and Engels argued that:

The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those that lack the means of mental production are, in general, subject to it. The dominant ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.

Quoted in Bottomore and Rubel (eds), 1963, p. 93

Contemporary Marxists have used such statements as the basis for developing Marxist theories of institutions such as the mass media (see Chapter 13).

However, the writings of Marx and Engels are open to a range of interpretations and they do not always state that the cultural superstructure of society is entirely shaped by the infrastructure. At other times Marx, or Marx and Engels, argued that the infrastructure influences, or perhaps sets limits on, what happens in the cultural superstructure, but does not totally determine it. Elements within the infrastructure can influence one another as well (see Chapter 15 for an elaboration of these views).

One interpretation of Marx, then, sees all culture in capitalist societies as a product of ruling-class ideology. The working class are seen as suffering from false class consciousness and their beliefs and culture will therefore be shaped by the ruling class. This theory has been called 'the dominant ideology thesis' (Abercrombie *et al.*, 1980). Other interpretations see the working class and other cultures as possessing some independence or relative autonomy from ruling-class domination and from the economic base.

Culture as the reflection of class differences

A further interpretation of Marx emphasizes class differences between cultures. From this point of view, different classes will always tend to have different cultures because their conditions of material existence are different. The different experiences of living as members of the ruling class or the working class will produce a different view of the world and hence a different culture. Stefan Morawski describes this interpretation of Marx and Engels's views in the following way: 'Ideology will here be considered as the statement or symptomatic expression of a pattern of social class attitudes, interests, or habits of thought' (Morawski, 1974). Thus working-class literature will be different from literature produced by the ruling class.

However, Engels accepted the possibility that aspects of culture such as literature could, in the work of some writers, rise above the class origins of

the writer and demonstrate revealing insights into society. An example is Engels's discussion of the German writer Goethe.

According to Engels, at times Goethe's work is restricted by his class background. His comfortable and respectable background as the 'Frankfurt alderman's cautious child, the privy counselor of Weimar' sometimes leads Goethe to celebrate German life. However, at other times, Goethe is 'the poet of genius, who is disgusted by the wretchedness of his surroundings' (quoted in Baxandall and Morawski (eds), 1974).

Here, Engels raises the possibility that people can see through false class consciousness and produce cultural works that show an appreciation of the oppression and exploitation found in class societies. Thus, literature and other forms of art and aspects of culture tend to reflect the experiences of different class groups, but they can sometimes rise above this to uncover something approaching the truth about society.

Marxist theories of the arts

John Berger – oil paintings and private property

Ruling-class art

One of the most straightforward Marxist theories of art is advanced by John Berger (1972). In *Ways of Seeing* he argues that oil painting – the dominant medium for painters between 1500 and 1900 – came to reflect the world view of the ruling classes. Berger says that 'The art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class.' He claims that in the period 1500–1900, 'a way of seeing the world, which was ultimately determined by new attitudes to property and exchange, found its visual expression in the oil painting'.

Oil paintings had special characteristics that made them particularly suitable for portraying ruling-class ideology. According to Berger, oil painting has a 'special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts. It defines the real as that which you can put your hands on.' This was important because oil painting came to be primarily concerned with the depiction of wealth or property.

Because of the sense of tangibility that oil painting can produce, it gave substance to the sense of ownership that the ruling class wanted to portray in their paintings. Although paintings had always

Marx and Engels believed that eventually the culture of society as a whole would change. Class consciousness would develop in the working class and they would begin to see through the distorted ideology of the ruling class. Capitalism would be replaced by communism and, in the absence of exploitation and ruling-class domination, humans would be able to return to creating things that expressed their true humanity.

(The strengths and weaknesses of the work of Marx and Engels will become clear as we discuss the way their ideas have been used by later Marxists. Criticism and evaluation of Marx and Engels relevant to their theories of culture can also be found on p. 437, pp. 609–20, and Chapter 15.)

Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of the general cultures of societies are examined elsewhere in the book (see, for example, pp. 33–6, 436–9 and Chapter 15). This section will therefore concentrate on Marxist theories of the arts, and particularly literature.

portrayed things of value, in earlier periods they were usually related directly to the glory of God. As capitalist society developed, painting focused more directly on the wealth and power of the ruling class, elevating money above religious considerations. Berger says:

Works of art in earlier traditions celebrated wealth. But wealth was then a symbol of a fixed social or divine order. Oil painting celebrated a new kind of wealth – which was dynamic and which found its only sanction in the supreme buying power of money.

Berger, 1972, p. 90

The ruling class were able to impose their own view of the world, simply because it was very largely they who commissioned paintings. Large numbers of paintings were commissioned by the wealthy – most of mediocre quality. It was more important to the buyers of the paintings that they portrayed them and their wealth in the way they wanted, than that the painting was of a high quality. Berger says, 'Hack work is not the result of either clumsiness or provincialism; it is the result of the market making more insistent demands than the art.'

Examples of ruling-class art

Berger gives a number of examples to illustrate his claims.

In earlier periods, paintings of Mary Magdalene tended to emphasize the importance of her story. This was that 'she so loved Christ that she repented of her past and came to accept the mortality of the flesh and the immortality of the soul'. However, by the time of the dominance of oil paintings, the typical portrait of her had changed. She was now portrayed as a woman to be owned by men – simply another possession. Berger says, 'She is painted as being, before she is anything else, a takeable and desirable woman.'

Still-life paintings were more obviously about possessions. These tended to portray such things as tables laden with luxurious foods as testament to the high living of those who had commissioned them.

Paintings of animals were also popular. However, they were not usually animals in the wild but 'livestock whose pedigree is emphasized as proof of their value'.

Landscapes were used to celebrate the property of the rich. Berger uses the example of *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, painted by Gainsborough (see Figure 12.1). The Andrews insisted on being included in the landscape which featured land owned by them. According to Berger, 'They are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions.'

Low-life paintings

Of course, not all oil paintings portrayed the property of the rich. However, even some that portray the poor reflect ruling-class ideology. Pictures of 'low life', such as pictures of debauched groups in taverns, were popular with the growing bourgeoisie in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The point of such pictures, though, was to tell a moral tale about how the rich deserved their success while the poor had only themselves to blame for their misfortune. Berger says that such paintings 'lent plausibility to a sentimental lie: namely that it was the honest and hard-working who prospered, and that the good-for-nothings deservedly had nothing'.

Rembrandt

Despite the emphasis that Berger puts upon ruling-class ideology in shaping oil painting, he does accept that some paintings were able to transcend the narrow concerns of the bourgeoisie. However, such works are exceptional and can only be painted by those who undergo a struggle to free themselves from dominant ways of thinking about the world. According to Berger, one painter who succeeded in this respect was Rembrandt.

In his early work Rembrandt succumbed to the dominant artistic style propagated by the bourgeoisie.

In an early self-portrait (see Figure 12.2) Rembrandt portrays himself with his first wife. He is essentially showing off his wife and, to Berger, 'The painting as a whole remains an advertisement for the sitter's good fortune, prestige and wealth.'

In a self-portrait painted thirty years later, when he was an old man (see Figure 12.3), Rembrandt portrays himself in a more sombre and reflective mood and includes none of the trappings of material success. Berger says, 'All has gone except a sense of the question of existence, of existence as a question.' Rembrandt has succeeded in shaking off ruling-class ideology and painting something of more universal and lasting significance.

Evaluation of Berger

Janet Wolff (1981) argues that Berger provides a rather crude and over-simplified explanation of oil paintings. She considers that his study lacked 'an adequate and systematic analysis'. However, Wolff does acknowledge that 'the intervention into the discipline of art history has proved to be extremely critical and influential, and it has stimulated a good deal of more detailed analysis'. Many other Marxist theories of art and literature have adopted a broadly similar approach, but have tried to refine the sorts of arguments put forward by Berger. One example is the work of Lucien Goldmann.

Lucien Goldmann – class and literature

The expression of class world views

In his best-known work, *The Hidden God* (1964), Goldmann develops a sociological account of the French writers Pascal and Racine. Unlike Berger, Goldmann does not believe that artistic products tend to reflect ruling-class ideology in a simple way. Instead, he argues that works of art (in this case great works of literature) reflect the world view of particular social classes. He says, 'the most important group to which any individual may belong, from the point of view of intellectual and artistic activity and creation, is that of the social class, or classes of which he is a member'. He justifies this claim by saying that humans in subject classes have to devote most of their effort to physical survival, while those in more dominant classes have to devote their time to maintaining their dominance. Class therefore tends to be prominent in people's thinking about the world.

To Goldmann, most people have only an incoherent and partial class consciousness. However, a few individuals are more perceptive than this. They are:

Figure 12.1 *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, by Gainsborough, c.1748–9, National Gallery, London



Figure 12.2 Self-portrait with Saskia, by Rembrandt, 1635-9, Gemaldegalerie, Dresden

Figure 12.3 (inset) Self-portrait as an Old Man, by Rembrandt, Gallerie Degli Uffizi, Florence



exceptional individuals who either actually achieve or who come very near to achieving a completely integrated and coherent view of the social class to which they belong. The men who express this vision on an imaginative or conceptual plane are writers and philosophers.

Goldmann, 1964, p. 17

Pascal and Racine

Goldmann sees Pascal and Racine as examples of just such exceptional individuals. He argues that they shared a particular *tragic vision* of the world, which reflected the position of a specific class grouping in French society in the seventeenth century. Goldmann refers to this class as the *noblesse de robe*.

The *noblesse de robe* consisted of members of legal and administrative professions who were not directly employed by the monarchy but were tied to the state, which was partially under the control of the monarchy. The world view of the *noblesse de robe* was therefore likely to partially reflect the world view of the monarchy.

However, the sort of functions they performed in, for example, the legal profession, inclined them towards a rather different world view, which was more rationalistic and less inclined to accept the traditional authority of the monarchy. Their world view therefore contained contradictory elements characteristic of both the monarchy and the rising bourgeoisie, who had a more rationalistic outlook. According to Goldmann, it was this contradictory ideology that was reflected in the tragedies written by Pascal and Racine.

The central feature of the tragedies was 'that everything which God demands is impossible in the eyes of the world, and that everything that is possible when we follow the rules of this world ceases to exist when the eye of God lights upon it'. In short, it was impossible to succeed in the world *and* to please God. This reflected the impossibility of acting as members of the bourgeoisie and pleasing the king. Thus the literature of Pascal and Racine directly reflected and expressed the contradictions of the class position of the *noblesse de robe*.

Evaluation of Goldmann

Janet Wolff argues that Goldmann provides a relatively sophisticated and subtle Marxist interpretation of literature. She says:

He relates literature and ideology to class structure without using a simple reductionist equation, but instead insists that social life is a totality. The relationship between literary production is not defined as causal or crudely deterministic, but is presented as mediated through social groups and their consciousness.

Wolff, 1981, p. 58

Wolff notes that Goldmann uses the idea of the exceptional individual, who can articulate a class consciousness which others can only partially grasp. To Wolff, this is a considerable advance on the much more deterministic approach of Berger.

However, Goldmann's work is not above criticism and, from a number of viewpoints, may be seen as inadequate.

First, it rather assumes without strong justification the primacy of class in shaping experience. To feminists, for example, gender is more important than class in influencing art. Other social groupings, such as ethnic groups and age groups, may also exert an influence on the production of literature and other art forms.

Second, Goldmann's work assumes that a class can possess an ideology, that individuals can develop a coherent and consistent view of the world, and that the meaning of a text can be clear to those who interpret it. All of these claims are challenged by a variety of post-structuralists and postmodernists who are deeply critical of such neat assumptions.

Third, despite the autonomy that Goldmann attributes to individual authors, he still advances a rather monocausal account of literature. It is doubtful whether one single factor, such as the expression of the world view of a particular class, can explain the content of art forms like literature. As this chapter develops, a range of other influences upon culture will be discussed.

Neo-Marxist theories of culture

A number of writers have developed what can be described as new or neo-Marxist theories of culture. All of these approaches have been significantly influenced by Marxism, but all tend to argue that culture possesses considerable autonomy or independence from economic influences, and that there is no straightforward correspondence between class and culture.

Raymond Williams – Culture and Society

One of the most influential figures in the development of cultural studies in Britain has been Raymond Williams. In a series of important books, Williams (1961, 1965, 1978) examined the relationships between society, culture and art, using some

aspects of Marxist theories in the development of his ideas.

Class consciousness and culture

In *Culture and Society* (1961) Williams questions two main aspects of Marxist theories of culture.

First, he argues that the use of the ideas of infrastructure and superstructure is misleading. He says, 'Structure and superstructure, as terms of an analogy, express at once an absolute and fixed relationship. But the reality which Marx and Engels recognize is both less absolute and less clear.'

Williams does not deny that economic factors influence culture, but he does deny that they determine culture in a straightforward way. He says:

A Marxist theory of culture will recognize diversity and complexity, will take account of continuity within change, will allow for chance and certain limited autonomies, but, with these reservations, will take the facts of the economic structure and the consequent social relations as the guiding string on which a culture is woven.

Williams, 1961, p. 261

In Williams's work there is much more room for historical detail and individual and group creativity than in some Marxist theories.

Second, Williams argues that Marxist theories of culture have been too concerned with art and literature. As such they have had too narrow a focus. For Williams, Marxist theory emphasizes the interdependence of all aspects of social reality, and such a narrow field as art and literature should not be taken as synonymous with culture. He therefore argues that 'Marxists should logically use "culture" in the sense of a whole way of life, a general social process.'

Working-class culture and bourgeois culture

Williams's own studies include an analysis of working-class culture. During the Industrial Revolution and the nineteenth century there was relatively little art and literature produced by the working class, but they did develop their own distinctive lifestyles and institutions. To Williams, the basis of working-class culture was the commitment to acting collectively. Individual members of the working class were too weak to defend themselves individually and too restricted in their life chances to achieve success through individual effort. Therefore, working-class culture has taken shape through 'the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the cooperative movement, or a political party'.

While Williams draws this general contrast between collective working-class and individualistic bourgeois culture, he does not believe that there is an absolute and clearcut distinction between them.

There is some overlap between bourgeois and working-class culture. He says, 'there is both a constant interaction between these ways of life and an area which can properly be described as belonging to or underlying both'. Furthermore, cultures are not the automatically determined products of class structures. Rather they are actively created by people who are responding to their economic circumstances.

Residual and emergent, alternative and oppositional culture

In a later work Williams (1978) tries to develop his ideas on the relationship between class and culture further. As in his earlier work, he denies that there is ever a monolithic, totally dominant ruling-class ideology in society. While there may be a dominant ideology, it is always likely to be challenged by alternative ideologies. There may be **residual ideologies** (the ideology of a class which is declining but still important) or **emergent ideologies** (the ideologies of new groups that are outside the ruling class). Residual and emergent ideologies may be either **oppositional** (opposed to the dominant ideology) or **alternative** (they co-exist with the dominant ideology without challenging it). Thus, to Williams, there is nothing inevitable about groups outside the ruling class either accepting or rejecting the dominant ideology. Both responses are possible, and of course people may accept some aspects of the dominant ideology while rejecting others.

Evaluation of Williams

Williams's ideas encouraged other writers to take working-class cultures seriously and therefore to study them. Such writers tried to move away from deterministic versions of Marxism and to take account of specific historical circumstances and human creativity. Nevertheless, they did not really resolve the question of the precise relationship between the economy and culture.

Furthermore, many contemporary theorists (for example, most postmodernists) argue that it is difficult to distinguish such a thing as working-class culture, and they would certainly deny that the working class retains a collective culture such as that described by Williams (see, for example, pp. 119–21). For such theorists, even if working-class culture was important in modern societies, it is no longer so in postmodern societies. Although this might not invalidate Williams's historical studies of working-class culture, it does raise questions about whether his theories are useful for understanding contemporary society. Other research suggests that working-class lifestyles remain culturally distinctive (see pp. 74–89).

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

In Britain, perhaps the most influential source of neo-Marxist ideas on culture in the 1970s and 1980s was the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (see pp. 259–60 and Chapter 11 for examples of their work). The CCCS extended the study of culture to an examination of youth cultures, incorporating elements of Marxism within the analysis.

Resistance through Rituals

In *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson (eds), 1976) John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts (1976) outline a theoretical approach to the study of youth cultures. They do so within a broadly Marxist framework, arguing that material circumstances impose limits on the sorts of cultures that people can develop. However, they allow considerable room for human creativity in producing culture.

Cultures and material life

According to Clarke *et al.*:

the 'culture' of a group or class is the distinctive 'way of life' of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life.

Clarke *et al.*, 1976, p. 10

Individuals are born into particular cultures and these tend to shape the way in which they see the world – their **maps of meaning**, as Clarke *et al.* term it. However, these maps of meaning and their associated cultures change as history unfolds and as members of social groups actively create cultures and innovate. But groups cannot just create new cultures at will. Cultures always relate to experiences and sets of material circumstances and are always partly shaped by pre-existing cultures. Furthermore, cultures exist in hierarchical relationship to one another. The culture of dominant groups is always likely to be more powerful than the cultures of less powerful groups. But Clarke *et al.* deny that a whole society's culture will ever be dominated by one ruling-class ideology.

Hegemony

Clarke *et al.* draw extensively on the theories of the Italian Marxist Gramsci (see pp. 615–17). Gramsci argued that in order to achieve political and ideological domination (which he called hegemony) powerful classes always had to struggle against competing ideologies and make compromises with other less powerful classes. Dominant ideology can always be

opposed and hegemony is never complete. Clarke *et al.* adopt a similar position. They say:

Other cultural configurations will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign – its hegemony. The struggle between classes over material and social life thus always assumes a continuous struggle over the distribution of 'cultural power'.

Clarke *et al.*, 1976, p. 12

It might be an unequal struggle, but it is a struggle none the less. Subordinate cultures will generally try to win space, to make room for their own distinctive lifestyles, values and institutions away from the influence of more powerful cultures. An example is the traditional working-class neighbourhood, dating from the 1880s, with its distinctive physical layout – 'the networks of streets, houses, corner shops, pubs and parks' – and social relationships – 'the networks of kin, friendship, work and neighbourly relations'. The working class exercised considerable informal control over these areas.

Youth subcultures

To Clarke *et al.* youth subcultures often represent creative attempts to try to maintain or win autonomy or space from dominant cultures. They win 'cultural space in the neighbourhood and institutions, real time for leisure and recreation, actual room on the street-corner'. They are partly shaped by the parent culture of the class from which they originate (for example, working class or middle class), but they are distinct from it.

Youth cultures create their own distinctive style: for example, by choosing a style of dress and listening to a particular type of music. The styles adopted by individual cultures represent an attempt to "solve", but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unresolved'.

The example of Teddy boys can illustrate these arguments.

Tony Jefferson – Teddy boys

Tony Jefferson (1976) argues that the youth culture of Teddy boys (or Teds) represented an attempt to recreate the sense of working-class community which came under threat in the post-war period from urban redevelopment and growing affluence in some sections of the working class.

Unskilled working-class youth felt that their social status was being undermined and that their 'territory' was under threat from the urban planners and from a growing ethnic minority presence in their neighbourhood. They responded by forming groups in which members had a strong sense of loyalty to one another

and were willing to fight over their territory. Their style of dress incorporated Edwardian-style jackets, bootlace ties and suede shoes. Jefferson sees aspects of this style as part of an attempt to buy status. For example, Edwardian-style jackets were originally worn by 'upper-class dandies' in Edwardian times, and by wearing them Teds hoped that some of the status of this group would rub off on them.

Bootlace ties appeared to come from American Western films, in which they were worn by the 'slick city gambler whose social status was, grudgingly, high because of his ability to live by his wits and outside the traditional working class mores of society'. Like their counterparts in the Westerns, the Teddy boys felt themselves to be outsiders who needed to live by their wits. They were seeking something of the status of the city gambler and so adopted part of their dress.

To Clarke *et al.* youth cultures do not solve the fundamental problems of working-class youth, but they do offer 'imaginary solutions'. Working-class youth can at least feel that they are doing something to protect their territory, gain status and recreate community. They also challenge and resist dominant ideologies without really threatening them. Youth cultures are part of the continuing struggle for cultural hegemony, born out of class cultures, but distinct from them. They are actively created by their members who develop their own styles as a way of expressing their situation and its contradictions, or their aspirations.

Culture and civilization

The culture and civilization tradition

Sociological perspectives are not the only ones that have been influential in the development of ideas about culture. Another influential source of ideas has been a tradition of thinking which has been influenced by disciplines such as literary criticism. This has been called the **culture and civilization tradition**.

This tradition is based upon an attempt to evaluate the worth of different cultures, just as a literary critic might evaluate the worth of different books. It has generally been critical of popular culture while extolling the virtues of high culture, and even, to a lesser extent, folk culture. The civilization tradition in general supports an elitist approach to culture in which the culture of the masses is seen as inferior to the culture of elite groups. It also tends to see high culture as in decline or under threat. However, different writers blame different causes for the deterioration of culture.

Evaluation of the CCCS

The work of the CCCS was important, not just in trying to develop a neo-Marxist approach to culture, but also in encouraging sociologists to take popular culture seriously. In analysing such things as the dress sense of Teddy boys it attempted to integrate elements of semiology (sometimes called semiotics) (see pp. 906–8) into neo-Marxist studies of culture. However, the neo-Marxist elements of their approach have rather fallen out of fashion. They have been seen as exaggerating the importance of class at the expense of other social divisions.

Postmodernists tend to follow the CCCS in taking popular culture seriously, but they do not follow them in seeing class as important. They see popular culture more in terms of straightforward consumption and lifestyle choices. Different subcultures are not unsuccessful attempts to win space from dominant cultures, because there is no dominant culture. Subcultures are simply an expression of the freedom of consumers to create their own cultures.

Neo-Marxist theories such as those developed by the CCCS tend to fall between two stools. To conventional Marxists they fail to fully acknowledge the importance of the economic base in shaping culture. To postmodernists they fail to fully accept the freedom that people have to invent cultures. Nevertheless, their work certainly helped to inspire the further development of cultural studies.

The culture and civilization tradition emerged out of concern about the effects of industrialization, urbanization and modernization in the nineteenth century. The massive changes introduced by the Industrial Revolution led to acute anxiety that the finer aspects of civilization were being undermined. John Storey (1993) argues that it was the emergence of a distinctive culture of subordinate classes that was the main source of anxiety.

The industrial working class in the growing towns and cities was able to develop:

an independent culture at some remove from the direct intervention of the dominant classes. Industrialization and urbanization had redrawn the cultural boundaries. No longer was there a shared common culture, with an additional culture of the powerful. Now for the first time in history, there was a separate culture of the subordinate classes of the urban and industrial centres.

Storey, 1993, pp. 20–1

Matthew Arnold – Culture and Anarchy

Matthew Arnold (1822–88) was the first significant writer in the culture and civilization tradition. Arnold was a poet and literary critic who also taught at Rugby School and was a school inspector. However, he was best known for his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1960, first published 1869).

Culture – the 'study of perfection'

To Arnold, culture was 'the study of perfection' which led to 'a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity' and a 'general perfection, developing all parts of our society'. People became cultured through the pursuit of perfection.

From Arnold's perspective, the pursuit of perfection was becoming uncommon in nineteenth-century England. People were becoming too materialistic and too concerned with machinery and its products. Arnold described the 'worship of machinery and of external doing', and complained of the dangers of equating civilization with material wealth. A truly civilized culture could only be attained through 'getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of free and fresh thought upon our stock notions and habits'. Through studying the finest poetry and literature people could develop their humanity, come closer to perfection, and in doing so help to improve society.

Reading was the key to this. Arnold comments that 'a man's life of each day depends for its solidity and value on whether he reads during that day, and far more still, on what he reads during it'.

Arnold clearly saw some reading as more worthy than other reading. Only the best was good enough, and the popular tastes of the mass of the population were certainly not uplifting and cultured. Indeed Arnold saw the urban working class as a dangerous and largely uncultured group. They had lost deference for their social superiors and insisted upon being able to do as they liked. This had resulted in dangerous political protests and threatened a descent into anarchy which could destroy civilization and culture. Arnold warned of how there was:

a body of men, all over the country ... beginning to assert and put in practice an Englishman's right to do what he likes; his right to march where he likes, meet where he likes, enter where he likes, hoot as he likes, threaten as he likes, smash as he likes.

Arnold, 1960, p. 76

The solution to the problem of the working class was to educate them. Without education they would be

unable to gain culture and therefore unable to play a constructive rather than destructive role in society.

Evaluation of Arnold

John Storey is fairly scathing about Arnold's work. He argues that its basic concern is not culture, but to advocate 'social order, social authority, won through cultural subordination and deference' (Storey, 1993). It is an argument for putting the working class back in their place by denying their developing culture any validity. However, Arnold was unwilling to actually take any part in politics to advance his cause – that is, the propagation of culture to maintain social order. Storey suggests that this gave him little chance of achieving his objectives and made his writings fairly pointless. Storey says:

Arnold's small circle would appear to be nothing more than a self-perpetuating intellectual elite. If they are never to engage in practical politics, and never to have any real influence on the mass of humankind, what is the purpose of all the grand humanistic claims to be found scattered throughout Arnold's work?

Storey, 1993, p. 26

All this elite could do was to congratulate each other on their own good taste, their own culture.

Elitist views of culture have increasingly been challenged in recent years (see pp. 900–1), and working-class culture during the Industrial Revolution has been viewed with more respect by some historians. For example, in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), E.P. Thompson portrays working-class culture during the Industrial Revolution as resourceful, creative and certainly no less worthy than the culture of higher classes.

F.R. Leavis – culture and civilization in the 1930s

F.R. Leavis wrote extensively about the decline of culture in the 1930s. He drew heavily upon the work of Matthew Arnold and in many ways his work can be seen as applying Arnold's views in a twentieth-century context. By the time he was writing, parts of the mass media had developed, and they became the focus of some of his strongest attacks.

In *Culture and Environment* (1977, first published in the 1930s) F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson look back approvingly to culture in pre-industrial times. They argue that there was a rich culture amongst ordinary people which developed naturally out of people's ordinary lives. However, this had been lost as a result of industrialization and modernization. Leavis and Thompson say:

What we have lost is the organic community with the living culture it embodied. Folk-songs, folk-dances, Cotswold cottages and handicraft products are signs and expressions of something more: an art of life, a way of living, ordered and patterned involving social arts, codes of intercourse and a responsive adjustment, growing out of immemorial experience, to the natural environment and the rhythm of the year.

Quoted in Storey, 1993, p. 32

The decline of culture

In 'Mass civilisation and minority culture' (first published 1930), Leavis explores the impact of the loss of folk culture on the appreciation of art and literature. Leavis claims that, in the past, even what is thought of as 'high-brow' culture was accessible to the masses. Thus, it was not just a cultural elite who went to watch Shakespeare's plays when they first appeared, but also a mass of ordinary people. It was true, perhaps, that they did not appreciate all the subtleties of Shakespeare, but they could enjoy his plays on a simpler level than the more cultured members of the audience.

According to Leavis, the situation was very different by the 1930s. Leavis believed that in all eras it was 'often a very small minority' on which 'the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends ... [it is] only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgement' (Leavis, 1930, in J. Storey (ed.), 1994). Only this small minority was capable of distinguishing great art from the mundane and the valueless, simply by virtue of their innate aesthetic judgement. They alone could determine who were the contemporary successors to writers such as Shakespeare, Dante and Baudelaire – the writers whose work would stand the test of time. A slightly larger group could learn to distinguish between good and bad literature and art and develop some ability to appreciate the greatness of the best works. However, they could never take a lead in the formation of aesthetic judgements about new works of art.

The culture of the elite and the culture of the masses

According to Leavis, the preservation of culture depended upon the retention of the elite minority with the most discriminating taste. Yet in the 1930s both the taste of this group and the culture of the masses had come under serious threat.

Elite culture was threatened by the mass of cultural products being created. There was too much for anyone to take in. Their aesthetic sensibilities would be swamped. Leavis writes:

A reader who grew up with Wordsworth moved among a limited set of signals (so to speak): the variety was not overwhelming. So he was able to acquire discrimination as he went along. But the modern reader is exposed to a concourse of signals so bewildering in their variety and number that, unless he is especially gifted and especially favoured, he can hardly begin to discriminate.

Quoted in Storey (ed.), 1994, p. 16

Serious though this problem was, to Leavis it was made much worse by the impact of social and cultural changes on the rest of the population. Leavis argued that cultural damage was being done by the consequences of modernization, such as the development of the motor car, the spread of American culture, the break-up of families, and 'the effects of better salesmanship, and more mass-production and standardisation'.

Leavis was highly critical of the dominant media of the day – radio broadcasting and films. He criticized both as 'passive diversion' which discouraged people from thinking for themselves and using their minds constructively. Films came in for the strongest criticism. They were described as involving 'surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals' judgement'.

Criticism and evaluation of Leavis

Leavis's work is open to a number of criticisms:

- 1 He may have exaggerated the attractiveness and harmony of pre-industrial folk culture. Raymond Williams (1963) argued that Leavis ignored the illiteracy, poverty and short life-expectancy of ordinary people in pre-industrial England. Without money, education or many years of life they were hardly in a position to develop their appreciation of art and literature very much.
- 2 Leavis fails to consider the possibility that cultural products such as films and rock music might be worthwhile art forms in their own right. In later decades some critics began to take the cinema seriously and to argue that it was no less worthy than fine art and literature.

An example of rock music being taken seriously is the work of Michael Gray (1973) on the lyrics and, to a lesser extent, the music of Bob Dylan. Gray argued that Bob Dylan's work was perhaps the most artistically accomplished work since that of D.H. Lawrence. He describes Dylan as 'A great artist', and argues that:

It is time it was more generally recognized that to use rock music, as Dylan has done, is not to be, ipso facto, lacking in such high seriousness; and the corollary is to analyse, not shudder at, what Dylan has achieved.

Gray, 1973, p. 19

Since the time Gray was writing, a number of rock musicians and other artists working in popular culture have had their work taken sufficiently seriously for it to become the subject of academic analysis.

- 3 Dominic Strinati (1995) develops this line of argument further, suggesting that elitist theories such as that of Leavis fail to justify their claims that high culture has superior characteristics. From this point of view, it is not just a question of *some* popular culture being taken seriously; instead *any* products of popular culture may be seen as great art by those who particularly like them.

Strinati describes the elitist view as based on 'a set of unexamined values which shape the perception of popular culture held by their adherents'. He goes on to say that 'Elitist judgements fail to take seriously both alternative interpretations of popular culture, those which can be developed from alternative vantage points outside the elite, and the value these alternatives possess'. Thus, for example, if a punk believes that the music of the Sex Pistols is greater art than that of Beethoven, or a dance music fan believes that Massive Attack's CD *Protection* is greater than Mozart's concertos, there is ultimately no way of determining who is right. It is simply a matter of taste, as there are no agreed criteria for fans of classical music and popular music on how the merits of music should be judged.

Mass culture

In 1950s America there was considerable concern about the impact of what was called **mass culture**. In many ways the writing that emerged out of this concern was similar to the work of writers such as Leavis. However, the concerns of mass culture went wider than art, which was the main focus of the work emerging from literary criticism. The critics of the 1950s were also somewhat less elitist than Arnold and Leavis. They were more likely to be radicals, supporting change in society, rather than conservatives seeking a return to a lost 'golden age' when high culture still had a dominant influence. Two writers, Bernard Rosenberg and Dwight Macdonald, can be used to exemplify this approach.

Bernard Rosenberg – mass culture in America

The debasement of culture

Bernard Rosenberg (1957) mounted one of the strongest attacks on mass culture in America. Rosenberg argued that, although American society had raised most people's living standards to unprece-

- 4 As the above point implies, the elitist view of culture does not therefore consider the possibility that taste might simply be a social construct. According to Bourdieu (1984), what is regarded as good taste is related to the **habitus** of particular social groups. (Habitus refers to the habits, lifestyles and behaviour typical of and familiar to particular social groups such as classes. See Chapter 11 for a discussion of Bourdieu.)

The lifestyles of higher classes encourage them to value particular cultural products, styles of speaking, and so on, above others. There is nothing inherently superior in these forms, but because they are associated with privileged classes they gain a higher status. The lower classes lack the cultural capital of the higher classes – that is, they do not possess the values and taste necessary to gain acceptance by privileged groups. They find it difficult to be successful in education (which is largely based on the culture of higher classes) and to be upwardly mobile in society.

- 5 Finally, Leavis may exaggerate claims that societies were developing a type of mass culture. The arguments about mass culture spread outside the rather elitist sphere of literary criticism and began to influence some sociological thinking as well. However, as we shall see, this line of thinking has been extensively criticized.

dented levels, it had done so at the expense of debasing culture. New technology had removed most of the repetitive and dehumanizing manual drudgery that used to take up so much of people's time. It had given them more leisure, and yet people felt less fulfilled than before. Rosenberg described the situation in the following, rather dramatic way:

Before man can transcend himself he is being dehumanized. Before he can elevate his mind, it is being deadened. Freedom is placed before him and snatched away. The rich and varied life he might lead is standardized. ... The mass grows. We are more alike than ever; and feel a deeper sense of entrapment and loneliness.

Rosenberg, 1957, p. 5

Technology and mass culture

What, then, was responsible for this lamentable state of affairs? According to Rosenberg, technology was the ultimate culprit. In communist countries (such as the USSR) and capitalist countries (such as the USA) alike, new media technology had allowed the development of mass culture. With individuals left

with considerable free time, the mass media (such as films, radio and cheap popular fiction) had stepped in to fill people's spare time. Soap operas, detective stories and popular magazines provided standardized and undemanding entertainment. Even in universities those who could simplify their subject and make it easy to understand were becoming popular.

Rosenberg was particularly scathing about popular self-help books which promised to teach people the skills necessary for success with little effort on their part. A series of 'How to' books promised to teach you how to do things such as 'using your imagination to originate a new selling idea' or 'How to draw upon an "inner power" to make sales.' Rosenberg comments that 'Success is still the bitch goddess of American society. The purveyors of mass culture allege that it too can be achieved through passive absorption.'

According to Rosenberg, then, people were no longer being challenged to think for themselves and risked becoming an uncritical, easily-manipulated mass. Rosenberg warned that 'At its worst, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism.'

Like others of his generation, Rosenberg thought that the rise of Fascism in Germany in the 1930s had only been possible because Germany had become a mass society in which Hitler was able to exploit the passivity of the population and manipulate them through the mass media.

Dwight Macdonald – 'A theory of mass culture'

Dwight Macdonald adopted a similar line of argument to Rosenberg, but developed his ideas in more detail.

Types of culture

Macdonald distinguished between **folk art**, **high culture** and **mass culture**.

He saw **folk art** as the 'culture of the common people' in pre-industrial societies. It 'grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of high culture, to suit their own needs' (Macdonald, 1957). Folk culture did not produce great art, but in its own limited way it had some merit, and it was at least authentic. It emerged out of genuine communities in which people interacted with one another.

High culture was not so explicitly defined. Macdonald took its meaning as almost self-evident. However, Macdonald did not just see the classic works of great artists, musicians and writers (for example, Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven and Shakespeare) as being examples of high culture. He also included the

work of twentieth-century avant-gardists in the category of high culture (the term **avant-garde** refers to artists who develop challenging and original work in a given field). Rosenberg includes in the avant-garde the painter Picasso, the poet Rimbaud, the composer Stravinski, and the writer James Joyce. High culture is seen as the product of great individuals who are able to produce work that appeals to a minority who can appreciate work of this calibre.

Mass culture is very different from either folk culture or high culture. It has little, if any, merit. It is designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator. It is unchallenging and has nothing of significance to say. It does not express a genuine culture in the way that folk art does, nor achieve the intrinsic artistic value of high culture. It is simply standardized, commercial kitsch imposed by businesses on the masses to make a profit. (**Kitsch** is a German word for popular culture. It tends to be used as a term of abuse, implying that what it refers to is mindless and worthless.) Macdonald said:

Mass culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians, hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of kitsch, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule.

Macdonald, 1957, p. 60

Like elite theorists such as Leavis, Macdonald saw mass culture as a threat to high culture. Like Rosenberg, he saw mass culture as creating a risk of totalitarianism. Macdonald thought that mass society and mass culture had made communist rule in the Soviet Union possible, and had facilitated Hitler's rise to power. It was not just culture that was at stake, but political control as well. Indeed, Macdonald follows something similar to a Marxist line of argument in seeing mass culture as a possible tool of the ruling classes.

The problem of mass culture

Why was mass culture such a problem? Macdonald made a number of claims:

- 1 He believed that **bad culture** would drive out **good**. People found mass culture easier to understand. It took less mental effort. It therefore tended to undermine high culture. Macdonald said:

It threatens high culture by its sheer pervasiveness, its brutal, overwhelming, quantity. The upper classes, who begin by using it to make money from the crude tastes of the masses and to dominate them politically, end by finding their own culture attacked and even threatened with destruction by the instrument they have thoughtlessly employed.

Macdonald, 1957, pp. 61-2

- 2 As a result, **mass culture** would end up creating a single, **homogenized, culture**. High culture would be **vulgarized and incorporated** in a simplified form into mass culture. For example, the high culture of the theatre was undermined by the mass culture of the cinema. Macdonald observed that plays were increasingly put on simply to try to sell movie rights. If the plays were too sophisticated to have the potential to be made into films, they would not be staged. Mass cultural forms, like detective stories, were adopting a bogus intellectual style to make them seem more artistically important than they really were. Macdonald cites the work of Dorothy M. Sayers as an example.

To Macdonald the distinction between high culture and mass culture was breaking down so that it was getting harder to distinguish between the two.

- 3 Macdonald believed that the triumph of mass culture would lead to increased alienation amongst those who created cultural products. There was a greater division of labour in media such as the cinema, when compared with the theatre, so that individuals were reduced to carrying out rather mechanical tasks relating to one small aspect of the film.
- 4 Macdonald claimed that mass culture was leading to 'adultized children and infantile adults'. He quoted research which suggested that American adults were increasingly reading comics and comic strips in newspapers. Adults were also watching children's television programmes, like *The Lone Ranger*, in large numbers, while children were gaining easy access to adult-orientated films and television. The result, according to Macdonald, was the creation of infantile adults – unable to cope with adult life without turning to escapist mass culture for leisure – and over-stimulated children, who grew up too fast.
- 5 Even more seriously, Macdonald believed that **mass culture** was undermining the fabric of society. It was creating a mass society, in which individuals were **atomized**. They were losing their involvement in small social groups and losing opportunities to interact with one another in a meaningful way. Instead, people were becoming isolated individuals relating only to centralized systems and organizations such as the mass media, political parties and companies. Macdonald said, 'The mass man is a solitary atom, uniform with and undifferentiated from thousands and millions of other atoms who go to make up "the lonely crowd" as David Riesman well calls American society.'

Conclusion

Macdonald's conclusions are those of a gloomy pessimist. He sees little sign that high culture can survive, arguing that even the efforts of the avant-garde are under threat from mass culture. Most

people had become trapped in a self-perpetuating mass society and mass culture, their sensibilities and will to resist dulled by several generations' output of mindless mass culture. Only 'heroes' could resist such pressure, and they were few and far between. Nevertheless, Macdonald did not see the situation as completely hopeless. It was still possible that, despite their dwindling number and influence, a small cultural elite could keep the flame of high culture alight.

Evaluation of mass culture theory

The idea that mass culture is harming society remains influential today. However, it has come under increasing attack and has generally fallen out of favour amongst sociologists of culture. In the 1970s Edward Shils (1978) argued that advocates of mass culture theory were wrong to say that there had been a decline in working-class and lower middle-class culture. He did not deny that most mass culture was not particularly enlightening, but he thought it less damaging for lower classes than the 'dismal and harsh existence of earlier centuries' (quoted in Storey, 1997).

Increasingly, though, sociologists have not just argued that mass culture is not as bad as its critics make out; they have begun to attack the idea that it is appropriate to evaluate cultures as superior or inferior to one another. Furthermore they have criticized the idea that it is possible to distinguish between just two cultures, high culture and mass culture. Herbert J. Gans is a case in point (see below).

Herbert J. Gans – the plurality of taste cultures

Herbert J. Gans attacked the idea that cultural experts had any right to try to impose their judgements about culture on others. He said, 'all people have a right to the culture they prefer' (Gans, 1974). Gans was an early advocate of the view that America had a large number of different **taste cultures**, all of which were equally worthwhile. Rather than simply distinguishing between worthwhile high culture and worthless mass or popular culture, he identified a range of different cultures, each of which had their own intrinsic worth. Gans identifies five main taste cultures.

High culture

High culture consisted of art, music and 'serious' literature (in fiction, for example, the seriousness was demonstrated by an emphasis 'on character development over plot, and the exploration of basic

philosophical, psychological and social issues'). To Gans, high culture was intended for small audiences and he emphasized the importance of the creativity of the creators of the culture (writers, artists, film directors and so on). Gans admitted that high culture did pay more attention to 'abstract social, political, and philosophical questions and fundamental societal assumptions more often, more systematically, and more intensively than do other cultures'. However, more popular cultures also addressed moral issues and paid attention to areas such as the problems of earning a living, which were neglected by high culture.

Upper-middle culture

Upper-middle culture was the culture of upper-middle-class, well-educated professionals and managers who had no special knowledge of or involvement in high-culture arts and literature. These people were less concerned with innovative music, literature and art than those involved in high culture. They wanted more plot in the fiction they read. They wanted the heroes in their books to achieve their goals in competition with other people. They enjoyed some of the writing of authors such as Norman Mailer and Arthur Miller, and read publications like *Harper*, *New Yorker* and *Vogue*. Broadway theatre and foreign films were also favoured by those with upper-middle-class culture.

Many women involved in this culture were interested in women's liberation and the cultural products of its advocates. According to Gans, on the one hand upper-middle-class culture rejected anything that was too experimental or too abstract, and on the other hand it rejected anything considered too 'vulgar' or populist. Gans believed that this was the fastest-growing culture in America (at the time he was writing) because of the expansion of college education.

Lower-middle culture

Lower-middle culture was the 'dominant taste culture' in the USA. It attracted those in lower professions, such as teaching, and those in administrative jobs. This taste culture was less interested in art, serious film, literature and so on than the other taste cultures examined so far. However, its followers were prepared to watch television series derived from upper-middle culture films (for example, *M.A.S.H.*), and to read magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, or the novels of Harold Robbins.

This taste culture wanted substance that was easy to understand and enjoyable. People who were part

of this culture would accept elements of high culture if they met these criteria. Thus, for example, they might own reproductions of the more popular paintings of artists such as Van Gogh and Degas (famous for his paintings of ballet dancers).

Gans argued that lower-middle culture was increasingly breaking up into different groups. There were traditional and progressive factions. Traditionalists objected to open discussion of sexuality in lower-middle-class culture, whereas progressives were in favour of it.

Low culture

Low culture was 'the culture of the older lower-middle class, but mainly of the skilled and semi-skilled factory and service workers, and of the semi-skilled white collar workers'. They rejected anything with the pretensions of high culture and stressed substance above all else. They liked stories with morals about individual and family problems, and films with plenty of action. The male hero in low culture films:

is sure of his own masculinity, is shy with 'good' women and sexually aggressive with 'bad' ones. He works either alone or with 'buddies' of the same sex, depends partly on luck and fate for success, and is distrustful of government and all institutionalized authority.

Gans, 1974, p. 91

Gans cites Clark Gable and John Wayne as examples. The mass media are important for transmitting low culture. Members of this taste culture enjoy television programmes such as the *Beverly Hillbillies*, rock and country music, and tabloid newspapers with sensational headlines.

Quasi-folk, low culture

Quasi-folk, low culture is described as 'a blend of folk culture and of the commercial low culture of the pre-World War II era'. It represents the tastes of many blue-collar workers and the rural poor. It is described as 'a simpler version of low culture, with the same ... emphasis on melodrama, action comedies and morality plays'. Comics, old Westerns and soap operas are amongst the cultural forms that are popular.

Age and ethnicity

As well as these five main, well-established and class-based cultures, Gans also discusses cultures based on age groups or ethnic groups.

According to Gans, youth cultures had existed for some time, but in the 1960s they became more diverse and influential. Some youth cultures were **total cultures**, while others were **partial cultures**. By

total cultures Gans meant a whole lifestyle outside of mainstream society, whereas partial cultures involved tastes of groups who remained within mainstream society.

Total cultures

There were five main types of total culture: a **drug and music culture**; a **communal culture**, which involved living in communes; a **political culture**, which was divided into many groups but which had in common the desire to overthrow American capitalism; a **religious culture**, based on religious sects or cults such as the Jesus freaks; and a **neo-dadaist culture**, concerned with experimenting with a mixture of new artistic, social and political ideas. Although these total youth cultures did not have many followers, they were highly visible and attracted a lot of concern from those in mainstream culture.

Partial cultures

Gans saw the partial cultures as part-time versions of the total cultures. They were more likely to have become commercially exploited, and were closer to mainstream tastes. However, they shared with total cultures a critical perspective on conventional lifestyles and a preference for radical music and other art forms.

According to Gans, **black culture** rose to greater prominence in the 1960s, although black Americans had, of course, always had their own culture. In the 1960s the civil rights movement prompted black Americans to be more proud of their culture and to produce more of their own music, television programmes, films and so on.

Finally, Gans discussed **ethnic cultures**. Each group of immigrants brought their own cultures with them but they tended to be less important to children born in America than they were to the original immigrants. However, Gans detected a revival of ethnic cultures amongst such groups as Italians and Poles.

The hierarchy of tastes

Gans was aware that there was no straightforward distinction between these cultures. Individuals might choose to consume cultural products from different taste cultures, and certain types of cultural product might be popular in different taste cultures. Nevertheless, he did believe that an overall **taste structure** existed.

There was a hierarchy of tastes, with high culture at the top and other cultures ranged below it. But Gans did not see this hierarchy as based on merit. It was largely the product of differences in the class, status and power of those who belonged to the different taste cultures. Thus, high culture and upper-middle culture were seen as better because they were

the cultures of the highest class and most powerful groups in American society. These groups were more able to fund and protect their cultures than other groups. For example, Gans notes that sexually explicit material is produced in both high culture (for example, James Joyce's book *Ulysses*) and in low culture (for example, hard-core pornography films and magazines).

In 1973 the US Supreme Court ruled that pornographic material could be acceptable if it had 'some redeeming social value'. This allowed sexually explicit high culture to continue untroubled by agencies of law enforcement, while low-culture pornography was criminalized.

Conclusion

Gans concluded by attacking critics of mass culture for trying to impose their own values on others. He argues that all of the different cultures examined by him fulfil the needs of their audiences for information and entertainment. In a pluralistic and democratic society they are all worthy of respect.

However, Gans did not entirely avoid his own value judgements. He did suggest that there were ways in which high culture could be seen as superior to other cultures. For example, high culture could deal with more aspects of life because its public was better educated than the public for other cultures. Thus high culture could consider philosophical issues whereas low culture could not. High culture might also be better able to provide adequate information to help people solve both personal and social problems.

Evaluation

Gans not only provides a strong critique of mass culture theory, he also develops his own conflict theory of culture and taste. His work represents a major advance on theories of mass culture because it recognizes that different cultures can be useful for different audiences, and because it recognizes that there is a plurality of cultures rather than just two.

Gans acknowledges the importance of class, ethnicity and gender in contributing to cultural diversity. His work is in some ways a precursor to postmodern theories of culture which emphasize plurality and diversity (see pp. 916–21). However, for some, his work retains an element of elitism. By arguing that high culture does have some advantages over other cultures, Gans fails to rid himself entirely of judgements about which cultures are more valid.

At an empirical level Gans's work provides an **interesting description of American cultures in the 1970s**. Clearly this description may not be applicable to different societies at different times, and his work may perhaps lack detailed arguments about why different groups have different tastes.

Dominic Strinati – a critique of mass culture theory

While Gans criticized mass culture theory by developing his own alternative approach to culture, Dominic Strinati (1995) is simply concerned with evaluating the theory of mass culture. Strinati is even more critical than Gans and attacks mass culture theory on a number of different grounds:

- 1 Strinati believes that mass culture theory is just as elitist as the approaches adopted by writers like F.R. Leavis and Matthew Arnold. He says that it 'fails to recognize that mass culture can be understood, interpreted and appreciated by other groups in distinct and "non-elitist" social and aesthetic positions within society'. It makes the false assumption that the masses are 'cultural dopes' willing to consume any old rubbish put before them by the mass media.

However, the consumers of mass culture are often critical and reject many products (such as films and television programmes) which they find insufficiently interesting or entertaining. Consumers of mass culture are not a passive and undifferentiated mass. They are discriminating in what they choose to consume, and active in deciding how they are going to react (see Chapter 13 for research which supports such claims).

- 2 According to Strinati, mass culture theory sees all popular culture as homogeneous – it is all the same. Strinati argues that this is far from being the case, and in reality there is a very wide variety of styles and genres. To take just one example, popular music can hardly be seen as homogeneous when it includes 'rap, soul, jazz, sampling, novelty songs and "serious ballads"'.
 - 3 Strinati does not agree with mass culture theorists like Macdonald that it is possible to distinguish an authentic and superior 'folk culture' from an inauthentic and inferior mass culture. For example, folk blues and country music are not part of 'pure' cultures untainted by outside influences. All have

been affected by a range of musical traditions. Furthermore, authenticity does not determine how much an audience enjoys its music. Pop music may be just as enjoyable and seen by its audience as just as good as any of the types of supposedly 'authentic' popular music.

- 4 The theory of mass culture rests upon the assumption that there is a reasonably clearcut boundary between high culture and mass culture, but this is not the case. Strinati says:

the boundaries drawn between popular culture and art, or between mass, high and folk culture, are constantly being blurred, challenged and redrawn. These boundaries are not given, nor are they consistently objective and historically constant. Rather, they are contested, discontinuous and historically variable.

Strinati, 1995, pp. 45–6

What was once considered mass culture might increase in status and come to be taken seriously as art. Strinati gives the examples of jazz music, the films of Alfred Hitchcock, and rock-and-roll records which have attained the status of classics.

Cultural politics

To Strinati, the theory of mass culture is a product of cultural politics rather than an objective assessment of the merits of different cultures. It represents a backlash by intellectuals who feel threatened by the growth of popular culture.

Mass culture threatens the hierarchy of taste by giving everybody the chance to choose what they think are the best books, films, music, paintings or images and so on. This undermines 'the symbolic power of intellectuals over the standards of taste which are applied to the consumption of cultural goods'. It is hardly surprising that they choose to fight a rearguard action to defend their cultural power. To Strinati, though, their arguments are unconvincing and unlikely to preserve the authority of their elitist judgements.

Ferdinand de Saussure – semiology

Signs

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is usually seen as the founder of **semiology** (sometimes called semiotics), or the science of signs. Saussure defines semiology as 'A science that studies the life of signs within society' (Saussure, 1966, first published in English in 1959). Saussure defines a sign as 'the

combination of a concept and a sound image'. Signs, then, consist of two parts. For example, the sign 'tree' consists of:

- 1 The **concept** of tree – the sort of object that is referred to as a tree.
- 2 The **sound-image** of tree. This is not the physical sound made when somebody says the word 'tree' but the 'psychological imprint of the sound'. You can recite the word 'tree' to yourself in your imagination without actually saying it, and the ability to do this means that the sound-image is a psychological phenomenon rather than the physical sound when the word is spoken.

Saussure then goes on to use the word **signified** to denote a concept, and the word **signifier** to denote the sound-image. Signified and signifier together form a **sign**.

The relationship between signifier and signified

Saussure argued that there is an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. There is no necessary reason why particular signifiers should be used to denote particular concepts. This is demonstrated by the fact that different languages use different words to signify the concept of tree. He says, 'nothing would prevent the association of any idea with any sequence of sounds'.

Although the signifier has no necessary connection with the signified, people cannot choose what words to use to signify particular concepts. Thus an individual cannot decide to start calling trees dogs and continue to be understood by others. Signs are handed down from one generation to the next. Saussure comments that 'No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations.' He therefore sees language as a **social phenomenon** shared by members of a social group and passed down to children. Therefore, it is largely **immutable** – it tends to be fixed and unchanging. Saussure accepts that some changes in language are possible over long periods of time. However, even then, there tend to be only small shifts in the meaning of particular signifiers.

Langue and parole

Saussure does not see language as simply a collection of unrelated signifiers. Signifiers are defined in terms of other signifiers. For example, the signifier 'animal' helps to define the signifier 'dog'. Furthermore, language can only be used if there are some rules governing how different signifiers are strung together to communicate ideas. Each language therefore has a structure consisting of the

grammatical rules, words, the meanings that link words together, and so on. Saussure calls this overall structure the **langue**. He distinguishes it from **parole**, which refers to the actual use of language.

The sentences in this book, the words spoken by sociology students in classrooms, the discussions people have in pubs and in their homes are all examples of parole. All require the existence of a langue to make the parole possible. Saussure compares this to the game of chess. In chess the langue consists of the rules governing initial placement of pieces, the movement of pieces, taking opponents' pieces, winning the game, and so on. The parole consists of the actual moves chosen by particular players.

Linguistics

To Saussure, linguistics involves examining parole – examples of the use of language – to understand the underlying structure or langue. A language should be studied as an integrated system with its own logic and structure. It should not be seen in terms of its links with an external reality. Thus the sign 'dog' should be seen in terms of its relationship with other signs, such as 'animal' and 'bark', rather than in terms of its relationship with the actual creature it describes.

Saussure therefore emphasizes that people experience the world in terms of signs which have particular meanings, rather than experiencing it in a direct material way. John Storey has described the implications of this aspect of Saussure's work. He says:

The function of language is to organize and construct our access to reality. It therefore also follows from this that different languages in effect produce a different mapping of the real. When a European gazes at a snowscape, he or she sees snow. An Eskimo looking at the same snowscape would see so much more, the reason being that Eskimos have over fifty words to describe snow. Therefore an Eskimo and a European standing together surveying the snowscape would in fact be seeing two quite different conceptual schemes.

Storey, 1997, pp. 70–1

Evaluation

Saussure effectively founded the disciplines of semiology and linguistics. However, his work has attracted some criticism. Norman Fairclough (1989, discussed in Strinati, 1995) argues that Saussure exaggerates the extent to which language is shared by members of a society. Fairclough also argues that Saussure neglects the importance of power. More powerful members of society may try to define their

Structuralism

Structuralism is an influential approach to the study of culture, which originated in theories of linguistics. Structuralist approaches to culture see language as the key to understanding the social world. They see the social world as a linguistic phenomenon. Most social life is conducted through language, and, from a structuralist point of view, shaped by it. Structuralist thought began with the work of the French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure.

own language as superior to other forms, creating the possibility of conflict over what forms of language are afforded the highest status.

However, there is no doubt that Saussure influenced the work of other writers. His ideas laid the foundations for the whole discipline of semiology which now extends to the analysis of signs other than words (for example, clothing and food). In this sort of study there is an attempt to uncover the meaning system of a set of signs in a way that is similar to the way in which Saussure examined the langue of a language.

Saussure's ideas also influenced the work of structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss, by suggesting to them that human thinking and social relationships could be shaped by underlying structures similar to those that are integral to a langue. The work of Lévi-Strauss will be examined shortly, but first we will consider an example of how semiotics has been used to understand culture.

Dick Hebdige – Subculture: The Meaning of Style

Subculture and style

Dick Hebdige (1979) used semiotics in order to try to understand the meaning of a number of post-war British youth subcultures. To Hebdige, it was possible to understand the meaning of the quiff of the Teddy boy, the safety pins of punks or the music of the mods.

Each youth subculture developed its own style and each took everyday objects and transformed their meaning. Hebdige says, “‘humble’ objects can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination’.

Teddy boys transformed the meaning of Edwardian suits and pointed boots. Punks transformed the meaning of safety pins and ripped jeans. They became gestures of defiance against society. They came to signify membership of particular subcultures and the whole complex set of meanings that each subculture expressed. Each subculture defines itself in opposition to mainstream culture. Each subculture is **spectacular**: it creates a spectacle and is intended to get noticed.

Skinheads and mods

Like Saussure, Hebdige believes that meanings derive from internal systems of differences. Just as a dictionary defines words in terms of their differences and similarities to other words, so the meaning of clothing is defined in terms of differences and similarities to other types of clothing. For example, skinheads wore ‘cropped hair, braces, short, wide Levi jeans or functional sta-prest trousers, plain or striped

button-down Ben Sherman shirts and highly polished Doctor Martin boots’. Their appearance was a kind of exaggerated version of the working-class manual labourer and expressed the image of the ‘hard’ working-class man.

On the other hand, mods adopted a more respectable appearance, which reflected aspirations to be upwardly mobile and join the middle class. However, their dress and style were certainly different to those of most middle-class people. Despite their ‘apparently conservative suits in respectable colours’, their style expressed an ‘emotional affinity with black people’ and a love of the world of ‘cellar clubs, discotheques, boutiques and record shops’, which was outside the ‘straight world’ of the respectable middle class.

The mods’ dress allowed them to move fairly easily between work and leisure, but at the same time they disrupted the conventional meanings of some of the clothes they wore. Hebdige says:

Quietly disrupting the orderly sequence which leads from signifier to signified, the mods undermined the conventional meaning of ‘collar, suit and tie’, pushing neatness to the point of absurdity ... they were a little too smart, somewhat too alert, thanks to amphetamines.

Hebdige, 1979, p. 52

Black subcultures

Black British people also developed distinctive subcultures based upon differences and similarities to other styles of dress. In the first post-war phases of immigration from the West Indies, the first-generation migrants adopted smart and conventional dress which reflected their aspirations to succeed in Britain. They wore, ‘rainbow mohair suits and picture ties ... neatly printed frocks and patent leather shoes’. However:

all hopes of ever really fitting in were inadvertently belied by every garish jacket sleeve – too loud and jazzy for contemporary British tastes. Both the dreams and the disappointments of an entire generation were thus inscribed in the very cut (ambitious and improbable) of the clothes in which it chose to make its entrance.

Hebdige, 1979

By the 1970s, the disappointments that stemmed from racism and high levels of unemployment began to be expressed in the clothes and subcultural style of Rastafarians. British Rastafarians expressed their alienation from British culture by adopting simple clothes with an African feel to them. Army surplus stores provided garments able to express ‘sinister guerrilla chic’. The key themes of Rastafarian style were resistance to the dominance of white culture and the expression of black identity.

Punk

Reggae, Rastafarianism and their associated styles influenced white youth culture, but their association with blackness precluded their wholesale adoption by white youths. In the 1970s, white youth developed their own subculture – punk – which Hebdige analyses in detail.

To Hebdige, punk almost rewrote the rules of semiology, in certain respects changing the way signs were used to convey meaning. Punk drew some meaning from reggae and Rastafarianism. Some punk groups, such as The Clash, incorporated reggae rhythms into their music, and some punks wore the red, gold and green of Rastafarians.

Punk also adopted an element of the Rastafarian opposition to being seen as British (rather than African). Punks explicitly attacked conventional notions of being British – for example, in the Sex Pistols songs *Anarchy in the UK* and *God Save the Queen*.

But punk also defined itself in opposition to certain types of music. It disliked the empty commercialism of the Glam Rock of people such as Alvin Stardust and Gary Glitter, but it was also critical of artists who were seen as pretentious (such as David Bowie and Roxy Music). Punk attacked the existing music industry and tried to break down the barrier between performer and audience. It celebrated the amateurish nature of many punk bands and encouraged anybody who could play a couple of chords on a guitar to form their own band.

Behind punk was a claim to ‘speak for the neglected constituency of white lumpen youth’, and a desire to ‘act out alienation’. It was undoubtedly British, but it ‘was predicated upon a denial of place. It issued out of nameless housing estates, anonymous dole queues, slums-in-the-abstract. It was blank, expressionless, rootless.’ Unlike Rastafarianism, it gave no hope for the future. There was no equivalent to the return to Africa which held the promise of redemption for British rastas. Instead, there was simply, in the Sex Pistols’ words, no future.

Punk and chaos

Hebdige comments that ‘The punk subculture, then, signified chaos at every level.’ Part of this chaos involved radical departures in the way signifiers were used. It was not just that punks took such ordinary objects as safety pins, bin liners and toilet chains and transformed them into fashion accessories. They were also able to detach symbols from their conventional meanings. For example, some punks and punk groups took the swastika as a signifier, but it ‘was wilfully detached from the concept (Nazism) it conventionally signified’. Used by punks, the swastika was no longer a symbol of racism – most punks were strongly anti-

racist. Instead it was used simply to signify a lack of meaning. Hebdige says, ‘the central value “held and reflected” in the swastika was the communicated absence of any such identifiable values’.

Signifying practices

Hebdige argues that conventional semiotics is unable to deal with the meaning of punk, where signifiers were separated from what they signified. He therefore uses the idea of **signifying practice** to understand the nature of signs in punk subculture.

According to the idea of signifying practice, the traditional relationship between langue (the structure of language) and parole (individual uses of language) is reversed. Langue is no longer seen as more important than parole. Rather than meaning deriving from the overall structure of language, it derives more from the position of the person using it. Thus the meaning of the swastika no longer comes from its relationship to other signifiers (such as ‘racism’ or ‘Nazism’) but from the fact that it was punks who were using the concept. The idea of signifying practices sees language as something that is fluid and capable of changing its meaning. Language is always in the process of being used; its meaning changes, and it is never fixed as it appears to be in dictionaries. Punk is an example of the ‘triumph ... of the signifier over the signified’.

Punk and the ruling class

Although Hebdige draws primarily on semiology to develop his ideas on youth subcultures, he also makes use of Marxist ideas. He sees all subcultures ‘as a form of resistance ... in which the experienced contradictions and objections to ... ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style’. Although they might pose no major threat to the ruling class, they do produce what Hebdige calls ‘noise’ – an alternative source of ideas which interferes with ruling-class attempts to create the impression of societal harmony.

Evaluation

Hebdige provides a stimulating attempt to understand the meaning of different subcultures and to develop semiology as a sociological tool. However, his work is only as good as his interpretations, and subcultures could be interpreted in different ways. There is no evidence in his work that the Teddy boys, mods or punks actually saw their own subcultures in the same way as Hebdige saw them. He did not, for example, conduct in-depth interviews with members of subcultures to check that their views corresponded with his own. To more conventional sociologists this could be seen as a limitation of his work. To postmodernists and post-structuralists Hebdige is wrong to assume that it is possible to attribute any one meaning to

punk. Rather, punk is open to a range of interpretations each of which is equally valid.

Claude Lévi-Strauss – structuralism, myths and kinship

Structures

Saussure's attempts to uncover the basic structure of signs and language influenced the development of structuralism. **Structuralism** analyses the basic structures underlying human thinking and human social groups. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1986, first published 1963) was the first to develop structuralism, using it to understand such things as kinship systems and myths.

Lévi-Strauss believes that there are certain structures which underlie all human thinking and social arrangements. While these structures cannot be directly observed, they can be revealed in human culture, which is shaped by these structures. Since the structures are common to all humans, evidence of them can be found universally. Thus the myths of the Ancient Greeks and North American Indians (or native Americans) reflect the same structures. Similarly, all kinship systems are based upon the same basic structures. The details of different myths or kinship systems may be very different, but the fundamental structure is the same.

Kinship

Lévi-Strauss argues that 'kinship phenomena are of the same type as linguistic phenomena' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). By this he means that kinship systems are based upon certain laws which apply to all cultures. Just as Saussure believed that all languages had the same relationship between signifiers and the signified, Lévi-Strauss believed that all kinship systems had the same basic relationships.

According to Lévi-Strauss, all kinship systems have sets of relationships, and, like a language, each part of the system only has meaning when related to other elements. Thus, for example, the position of wife can only exist if related to the position of husband, and the position of mother can only exist in relation to the position of son or daughter. Furthermore, the same basic parts of kinship systems are found everywhere. Lévi-Strauss says:

the recurrence of kinship patterns, marriage rules, similar prescribed attitudes between certain types of relatives, and so forth, in scattered regions of the globe and in fundamentally different societies, leads us to believe that, in the case of kinship ... the observable phenomena result from the action of laws which are general but implicit.

Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 34

So what then is the basic structure of kinship? Lévi-Strauss believes that it involves three types of family relationship: 'a relationship between siblings, between spouses, and a relation between parent and child'. In addition there is an **avuncular** relationship between uncle or aunt and nephew or niece. This derives automatically from the existence of relationships between parents and children and between siblings.

This basic structure is 'a direct result of the universal presence of an incest taboo'. The incest taboo prohibits sexual relationships between close relatives such as siblings and parents and children. The existence of this taboo means that 'a man must obtain a woman from another man who gives him a daughter or a sister'. The basic kinship structure needs to exist to establish which members of society are not the kin of an individual – and with whom that individual can therefore have a legitimate sexual relationship.

Within different kinship structures the strength of one relationship will tend to determine the strength of others. In the Trobriand Islands, for example, sibling relationships are fairly weak, so children have closer relationships with their fathers than they do with uncles. In Tonga, on the other hand, sibling relationships are seen as more important than spouse relationships. Consequently boys have close relationships with uncles – sometimes closer than the relationship with their own father.

Binary oppositions

To Lévi-Strauss, kinship systems are not the only aspects of culture which are universal. He also claimed to find certain **binary oppositions**, or pairs of opposites, which structure all human thinking.

These binary oppositions stem from the way that humans tend to divide up the world into 'segments so that we are predisposed to think of the environment as consisting of a vast number of separate things belonging to named classes' (Leach, 1970). Examples of such binary oppositions are nature/culture, man/woman, good/bad. The categories in each binary opposition are mutually exclusive; something cannot be part of nature and culture at the same time. However, the existence of binary oppositions sometimes causes contradictions. Myths are used to try to resolve these contradictions.

Myths

Many myths incorporate elements related to food. Eating food is an essential part of human culture and, according to Lévi-Strauss (1986, first published 1963), humans consume food in ways related to the opposition between nature/culture. **Raw food** is seen as part of nature. Animals, which are part of nature, eat food in raw form. **Cooking**, on the other hand,

transforms food into a part of culture because it is something that humans do to food. Left to their own devices, meat or vegetables will rot as part of a natural process. Like raw food, rotted food is seen as part of nature.

Lévi-Strauss argues that food in different states is found in many myths. The discovery of fire and the cooking of food features prominently in some of them. It is used to make sense of the transition of humans from being animals – which eat raw food, and are therefore part of nature – to being humans who are cultured and have the means to cook food.

Another fundamental problem dealt with in myths is the origin of human beings. In many, if not all, cultures it is believed that humanity had an **autochthonous** origin, that is that the first humans were created autonomously without being born to a mother and father. In some cultures humans are seen as coming from the earth, in others as being created by God. This belief contradicts human experience which shows that humans come into being as the result of a union between a man and a woman.

This problem is dealt with in the Oedipus myth 'which relates the original problem – born from one or born from two? – to the derivative problem; born from different or born from same?' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). In the Greek Oedipus myth, Oedipus marries his mother Jocasta, kills his father Laios, and slays the Sphinx, a monster who does not want men to live.

Lévi-Strauss notes that the meaning of Oedipus is 'swollen-foot' and that in mythology people who are born from the earth are either unable to walk or are clumsy walkers. He therefore believes that Oedipus represents autochthonous birth even though he was born with a mother and a father. The myth is unable to resolve the contradiction between autochthonous and bisexual reproduction, but it does express the contradiction in mythical form. Furthermore, although the contradiction is not resolved, humanity does survive, as the creatures which threaten it (such as the Sphinx) are killed.

As with other myths, Lévi-Strauss does not see the Oedipus myth as the product of a particular culture. He argues that the basic structures of this myth are to be found in very different and widely separated societies. The details of the story may vary, but the structure remains the same. It is therefore a product of the basic structures of human thought, particularly the existence of certain binary oppositions.

Lévi-Strauss concludes that myths serve as an 'intermediary entity' between parole (particular stories or myths) and langue (the basic structures of thought and the human brain). Myths express the structure in the form of particular stories and make it possible to deal with, and sometimes resolve, the contradictions in binary oppositions.

Evaluation

Dominic Strinati (1995) argues that Lévi-Strauss tends to use highly selective evidence in support of his theories. While he uses plenty of examples to back up what he says, he tends to ignore any evidence that contradicts him. For example, Strinati says, 'his analysis of Oedipal myths is only successful because he selects those features of the stories which suit his case, and ignores others which contradict the notion that they are expressions of a universal mental structure'. If they truly expressed a universal mental structure, then all examples would support his theories and there would be no need to be selective.

Because Lévi-Strauss is seeking evidence of universal mental structures his arguments are reductionist: that is, they try to reduce all culture to being the product of fixed mental structures. Lévi-Strauss therefore neglects the importance of history in shaping cultures and makes little attempt to explain the variety of human cultures that exist. Strinati says:

Downplaying the importance of history means that the problems posed for any analysis of popular culture by historical variations in cultures and societies are simply not addressed. Indeed, it could be argued that it is impossible to understand the formal structures of language or myth outside of their social and historical contexts.

Strinati, 1995, p. 121

Strinati also accuses Lévi-Strauss's structuralism of being **deterministic**. It allows no room for human creativity and simply assumes that all culture is automatically shaped by unconscious mental structures whatever the wishes of individuals. Furthermore, the meaning of culture is always open to interpretation, and this very fact 'suggests that the importance of the human subject cannot be so easily dismissed'.

Finally, Strinati attacks Lévi-Strauss's claim that humans always think in terms of binary oppositions – for example, that between nature and culture. Strinati admits that all societies have to respond to the existence of nature, but they do not necessarily see it as the opposite of culture. Different societies understand nature in different ways; it does not have the same meaning for everybody and it is not always seen in terms of a binary opposition with culture. This point could be extended to all of Lévi-Strauss's examples of binary oppositions. There are plenty of occasions when humans think in more subtle terms than distinguishing between pairs of opposites.

Some of the criticisms of Lévi-Strauss are addressed in the work of the next writer to be examined, Will Wright.

Will Wright – the structure of the American Western

Wright and structuralism

In his book *Sixguns and Society* (1975), Will Wright takes his inspiration from Lévi-Strauss's structuralism in analysing Western films. Although influenced by the work of Lévi-Strauss, Wright's approach does differ.

First, he does not see the structure of the Western as a reflection of the basic structures of the mind. To Wright, Westerns reflect the structure of society at particular times rather than unchanging mental structures. The structure of Westerns therefore changes as society changes. According to Wright, the characters in myths represent certain social principles and they 'act out a drama of social order' (Wright, 1994, first published 1975). A fight between two people, for example, is not just a fight between individuals, but might represent 'a conflict of principles – good versus evil, rich versus poor, black versus white'.

Second, Wright does not follow Lévi-Strauss in believing that all human thought is shaped by the existence of binary oppositions. Much literature is complex. It may be based upon similarities and differences between three or more characters rather than stark contrasts between pairs of opposites. However, Wright does believe that binary oppositions are central to the nature of myths, and he sees Westerns as a type of myth.

The use of binary oppositions simplifies myths and ensures that the message they carry gets across. Wright comments, 'when two characters are opposed in a binary structure their symbolic meaning is virtually forced to be both general and easily accessible because of the simplicity of the differences between them'.

Wright then proceeds to analyse the structure of Westerns and finds that there are three main types: the classical plot, the transitional plot and the professional plot. Of these most attention is paid to the classical plot – the original plot from which alternative types diverged later in the development of the genre.

Classical Westerns – *Shane*

Classical plots dominated Westerns from 1930 to 1955. A good example of this type of plot is the film *Shane*. In this film, the hero, Shane, stops for water at a small farm. The couple who run the farm (the Starretts) are initially suspicious of Shane, and he leaves. Shortly afterwards, the Rikers, who are big cattle ranchers in the area, arrive and tell the Starretts that they must leave the land so that they can extend their cattle ranch. At this point Shane

returns and tells the Rikers to leave. Shane becomes more friendly with the Starretts who are grateful for his intervention.

In the local town the next day Shane refuses to fight with one of the Rikers' cowboys. In the evening several farmers gather at the Starretts' farm to discuss how to resist the aggression of the Rikers. Shane is introduced but is accused of cowardice by one of the farmers who witnessed the incident with the Rikers' cowboy earlier in the day.

However, the following day, Shane is confronted by the Rikers' men in the saloon. He refuses to back down when challenged by them and, with the aid of some of the farmers who are there, defeats Riker's men in a fight. Riker hires a gunfighter and takes revenge by burning one of the farms.

Most of the farmers are ready to give up the fight but Joey Starrett persuades them to stay and he resolves to kill Riker. Shane tries to persuade Starrett that it is too dangerous for him to fight Riker, but Starrett is insistent. Shane knocks Starrett unconscious to prevent him challenging Riker. Shane goes into town, kills the hired gunfighter and two of the Riker brothers and effectively defeats the Rikers. Shane then leaves the area despite Joey Starrett shouting to him to come back.

The classical plot

Wright argues that the basic plot of this Western is common to all Westerns with a classical plot. Wright sees this as consisting of 13 elements which are always present:

- 1 'The hero enters a social group.'
- 2 'The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability.'
- 3 'The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status.'
- 4 'The society does not completely accept the hero.'
- 5 'There is a conflict of interests between the villains and society.'
- 6 'The villains are stronger than society; the society is weak.'
- 7 'There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain.'
- 8 'The villains threaten society.'
- 9 'The hero fights the villains.'
- 10 'The hero defeats the villains.'
- 11 'The society is safe.'
- 12 'The society accepts the hero.'
- 13 'The hero loses or gives up his special status.'

Wright, 1994, first published 1975, pp. 123–5

Wright identifies four main binary oppositions in this plot:

- 1 An opposition between people **inside** and people **outside** society. The farmers in *Shane* are inside society, and Shane outside, with the ranchers (the Rikers) being seen as largely outside society.
- 2 An opposition between **good** and **bad**. The villains – the Rikers – are bad; the farmers and Shane are good.
- 3 An opposition between the **strong** and the **weak**. The hero and the villains are strong; the society (represented by the farmers) is weak.
- 4 An opposition between **wilderness** and **civilization**. This is similar to the opposition between societal insiders and outsiders except that the villains are seen as part of civilization along with the farmers. Shane represents the wilderness.

Why then did the classical Western have these sorts of plots involving these oppositions? Wright interprets them as a reflection of American capitalism. In America at the time of these Westerns, big business was unpopular. Big businesses were seen as responsible for the Wall Street Crash (a plunge in share values) in 1929, and for the subsequent recession.

In classical Westerns big business is represented by ranchers. Big business was seen as harming individuals with small businesses (represented by the farmers), who were trying to earn a living to keep their families. The solution was to be found in the actions of heroic individuals who could save America from the corruption within society coming from big business. Shane, of course, represents the heroic individual.

The transitional plot

As American society changed, the Western changed too. The transitional plot was an intermediate stage. In this sort of Western the hero starts as a societal insider, but discovers society to be corrupt. The hero therefore moves away from society and civilization and aligns himself (the hero is always male) with the wilderness. However, society is always too strong and ultimately prevents escape. According to Wright, the 1954 film *Johnny Guitar* was the last Western with a transitional plot.

Post-structuralism

Derrida, Lacan and Foucault

Post-structuralism is a rather general term used to refer to the work of writers such as Jacques Derrida (see pp. 159–60), Jacques Lacan (see pp. 158–9) and Michel Foucault (see pp. 635–9).

The professional plot

After 1954 the transitional plot was replaced by the professional plot. This is similar to the transitional plot except that the hero is initially dedicated to some form of professional activity.

According to Wright, this sort of plot reflected the increased importance of technocratic professionals in American corporations, who felt their lives to be too restricted by the demands of those organizations. Instead of doing what they wished, they had to follow the aims laid down by corporations. The heroes of the professional plot are unwilling to have their individualism crushed by society, though in the end they cannot avoid it.

Evaluation

Wright's work is not open to the charges of reductionism and determinism which have been effectively levelled at Lévi-Strauss. He shows more awareness of how particular historical circumstances might shape the nature of the Western film. However, he may still be too dogmatic in arguing that certain narrative structures are associated with particular eras. For example, John Storey argues that the 1990 film *Dances with Wolves* (in which a cavalry officer rejects the army and goes to live among the Sioux) is a good example of a transitional plot.

It can also be argued that Wright underestimated the sheer diversity of Westerns. In the 1960s and 1970s, Westerns with diverse plots expressing quite different ideologies were made. For example, *The Cowboys* (a John Wayne film) was made to support American involvement in the Vietnam War, whereas *The Culpepper Cattle Co.* was an anti-war Western. Some films had the main aim of providing a more realistic view of the West (for example, *Will Penny*, *Doc*, and *Little Big Man*), while others harked back to the classical plot (for example, *Red River*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and *Valdez is Coming*).

The criticisms of Wright, though, are rather less damaging than those of Lévi-Strauss. Wright did at least try to relate the structure of films to their changing historical context; he just over-simplified the relationship. Lévi-Strauss made much more sweeping claims than Wright – claims which are all the more difficult to support.

At first sight these writers have little in common since they wrote about somewhat different issues using a **variety** of theoretical **approaches**. Jacques Lacan is **influenced** by **psychoanalysis** and is concerned with gender differences in early human

development. Jacques Derrida's work is based more upon linguistics and focuses on the meaning of language. Michel Foucault's work was wide-ranging and considered issues as diverse as the development of prisons, sexuality, madness and, more generally, the relationship between power and knowledge.

However, they are grouped together as post-structuralists because their work includes some broad philosophical similarities. They are seen as post-structuralists because their work has developed out of a rejection of the idea of structures. Nevertheless, it owes a lot to the emphasis on language found in the work of semiologists and structuralists such as Saussure and Lévi-Strauss.

Post-structuralism and Lévi-Strauss

Post-structuralists reject Lévi-Strauss's belief that it is possible to find certain fixed structures in society which reflect the human mind. They also reject the Marxist view that society has certain structures (such as a class structure) which shape social relationships. Foucault, for example, saw power/knowledge as the key to understanding how society is shaped (see p. 637). Power/knowledge has no fixed form but constantly changes in the course of interaction. Power is not to be found in social structures, but is intimately linked to the way people talk about things and create particular discourses (see p. 635 for a discussion of discourse).

Language, meaning and subjectivity

Chris Weedon argues that post-structuralists 'share certain fundamental assumptions about language, meaning and subjectivity' (Weedon, 1994, first published 1987). The emphasis on language is to be found in Lacan's idea of the symbolic order (see pp. 158–9), Derrida's discussion of *différance* (see pp. 159–60) and Foucault's discussion of discourse. All agree that the way people understand society and the way society works are shaped by language. As Weedon puts it, 'Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested.'

However, post-structuralists insist that language does reflect or describe some underlying reality or structure. They argue that it is language that creates reality rather than reflecting it.

Madan Sarup says that 'In post-structuralism, broadly speaking, the signified is demoted and the signifier made dominant' (Sarup, 1988). Sarup points out that Derrida 'believes in a system of floating signifiers pure and simple, with no determinable relation to any extra-linguistic referents at all'. While, for example, Lévi-Strauss looked for the meaning behind myths, post-

structuralists deny that any fixed meaning is present.

Derrida argues that the meaning of a text (anything that contains meaningful signs) depends upon how a particular reader interprets it. Thus, if two people interpret a film or book as having different meanings, each interpretation is equally valid. As Madan Sarup says, 'While structuralism sees the truth as "behind" or "within" a text, post-structuralism stresses the interaction of reader and text' (Sarup, 1988).

Meaning is always related to the particular context in which it is being discussed. Outside that context the meaning might be quite different.

Post-structuralist feminism

Although post-structuralists do not believe that it is possible to see behind signs and language to find the truth, many believe that the particular meanings that gain acceptance are of crucial importance. Chris Weedon, a post-structuralist feminist, gives some examples.

Weedon (1994) argues that the outcome of rape trials in the United Kingdom is largely determined by the meaning given to the idea of 'natural justice' and the meaning attributed to the word 'rape'. The dominance of masculine definitions of natural justice leads to a situation where men are unlikely to be convicted of rape. This is because it is seen as 'natural' for a man to continue with sex even when a woman says no. From this point of view, it is unjust for courts to find men guilty where women may have appeared to encourage sex. Weedon says, 'courts often endorse the view of rape as an active endorsement of male sexuality in the face of female "provocation". In the view of some judges, this may take the form of going out alone at night, wearing a mini-skirt or being a prostitute.' From Weedon's point of view it is important to challenge this view of natural justice so that courts are more likely to find rapists guilty and punish them.

As a post-structuralist Weedon sees arguments over language as having a key social and political role. Changing the accepted interpretation of a word or sign in particular contexts can have a crucial role in promoting greater social justice. This process can make use of Derrida's idea of *deconstruction* (see pp. 159–60), in which the meaning of signs is taken apart and found to be contradictory.

Post-structuralism and identity

As well as attacking the idea that signs have any fixed meaning, post-structuralists also reject the idea that individuals have a fixed sense of who they are – that is, of identity. Post-structuralists use the idea of the subject.

According to Chris Weedon, in conventional views of the subject, "Subjectivity" is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual which are unique, fixed and coherent and make her what she is.'

Weedon and other post-structuralists reject this view. They argue that individuals do not have a unique, fixed or coherent idea of who they are or sense of identity. Instead their identity is shaped through involvement in particular discourses. From this point of view, experience shapes your subjectivity, but experience itself is only understood in terms of the discourses that surround it. For example, a person does not simply experience 'family life' in a direct way. Instead they make sense of it through the discourses – the ways of thinking and talking about the family – that they come into contact with.

Somebody influenced by feminist discourse will experience being a 'mother' or a 'wife' very differently from somebody influenced by more traditional discourses of the family. Since there are a wide range of discourses available, and each of these may be challenged and changed over time, individuals do not have a settled sense of who they are. Chris Weedon suggests that even the identity of being a woman has no fixed meaning. What people understand by womanhood, and how women see themselves as women, changes as they come into contact with continually changing and contested discourses of femininity (see pp. 921–32 for a fuller discussion of identity).

Post-structuralism attacks the foundations on which most types of social science have been based, and instead focuses on the fluid and indeterminate meaning of language. By undermining conventional approaches in social science post-structuralism paved the way for postmodern theories of society and culture. These will be examined shortly.

Lawrence Grossberg – The Deconstruction of Youth

An example of post-structural analysis is provided by Lawrence Grossberg's discussion of the changing meaning of 'youth' (Grossberg, 1994, first published 1986). To Grossberg, the meaning of youth does not simply reflect a changing reality. Instead the meaning helps to create the reality it describes. If people come to think of 'youth' in a particular way, then people who think of themselves as young will tend to act in ways that are consistent with this view. The signifier 'youth' has subtly changed its meaning and has started to reshape how youth actually behaves.

Youth practices and discourses

Grossberg outlines three main phases in the development of youth discourses and practices:

- 1 Following the Industrial Revolution, discourses about young people were more concerned with the ideas of childhood and adulthood than with the idea of youth. Childhood was seen as a time of innocence. Children needed to be provided with protection against the premature loss of innocence. Schools, medical institutions and the family became the three types of institution responsible for protecting children and preparing them for the adult world. Children were kept away from work until they were deemed old enough to become adults and leave school. However, once they reached the necessary age, they were expected to adopt an adult outlook swiftly and to take on adult responsibilities.
- 2 After the Second World War there was a baby boom. It became important to delay the entry of the baby boomers into the labour market so that unemployment did not rise. The idea of youth or adolescence as an extended transitional period between childhood and adulthood became increasingly important. A growing number of young people carried on in the educational system for increasing periods of time. However, the discourses surrounding youth were rather ambiguous. Youth was seen as 'on the one hand, a time of fun, a time in which one could take risks and, on the other hand, a potential threat'. In this period, youth managed to carve out its own space and its own cultures, particularly those related to rock-and-roll. Grossberg notes that rock-and-roll managed to find space to exist outside institutions run by adults. He says, 'the physical spaces which it appropriated and created as its own: the street, the jukebox, the party and the "hop/dance" ... all attempt to exist outside of the family and of the school'. Young people took the new discourse of youth and used it to create their own culture.
- 3 From the late 1970s, though, things were beginning to change. This was characterized by the 'sliding of the signifier of "youth" from rock and roll to video-computers'. Young people lost some of their overt rebellion and belief that they could change the world, and replaced it with cynicism. Youth became more knowledgeable about the adult world, and more obsessed with becoming part of it. Young people lost the desire to celebrate youth in its own right, which was typical of the earlier post-war period. They 'returned to a conception of youth as training for adulthood with its own leisure activities, its own fun, but without any special significance'. The leisure activities themselves have changed. Political activities have been superseded by hanging around in shopping malls, and experimentation with mind-altering drugs has become less significant than getting drunk. Idealism and rebellion are out of fashion, copying adults is in.

Grossberg largely attributes this change in the meaning of youth to the way in which adults have helped to shift the discourse of youth. As the baby boomers reached middle age and were unwilling to give up their idea of themselves as youthful, they redefined youth as an attitude of mind rather than simply in terms of age. Some tried to hang on to their youth by working out at the gym.

Many aspects of youth culture became incorporated into adult-controlled institutions. For example, rock music has been incorporated into adverts and has become an integral part of commercial television (for example, MTV). The boundaries between youth and adulthood have become somewhat blurred in these new discourses, making it more difficult for youth to retain a distinctive identity. According to Grossberg, as youth move away from identities based on music towards those based on video-computer technology, they are denying their youthfulness. They are trying to be more adult than the adults by knowing more than them about grown-up technology.

Evaluation of post-structuralism

Post-structuralism focused attention on the importance of language, which was certainly neglected by many other sociologists (including functionalists and Marxists). But the focus on language is the greatest weakness of post-structuralism as well as its greatest strength.

Their emphasis on language leads post-structuralists to neglect material reality. For

example, Marxists would argue that material wealth has just as much influence on society as discourse or ways of talking about things. In the end capitalists have the power to determine which television programmes or films are made and promoted. To socialist and Marxist feminists it is the wealth of men rather than the way language is used that keeps women oppressed.

Like other sociological approaches which deny the existence of absolute truth (such as postmodernism and ethnomethodology (see Chapter 15)), post-structuralism advocates **relativism**. It argues that the 'truth' depends simply on who you listen to, which discourse is accepted. Because signifiers are defined in terms of other signifiers, they cannot represent reality.

This creates a problem shared with other relativist approaches: there is no reason to accept post-structuralism above other sociological perspectives. From a post-structuralist viewpoint each perspective is simply a different discourse and there is no way of testing which are true and which are false.

Post-structuralists clearly believe that their own discourse is superior to other discourses. Some see certain perspectives (for example, feminism) as being more valid than others (for example, functionalism). However, the philosophy underlying their own perspective prevents them from being able to show why their views should be accepted above the views of others. (For an evaluation of Foucault, see pp. 635–9; for an evaluation of post-structuralist and postmodern feminism, see pp. 157–63.)

Modernity, postmodernity and culture

Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters – postmodernization

Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (1992) argue that contemporary societies are undergoing a process of postmodernization. They are in the process of changing from **modern** to **postmodern** societies. Crook *et al.* trace the changes involved in this process by comparing modern and postmodern culture.

Modern culture

According to Crook *et al.* there are three main characteristics of modern culture: **differentiation**, **rationalization** and **commodification**.

1 **Differentiation** involves the separating out of different parts of society. Economic, political, social and cultural spheres become increasingly distinct from one another. Drawing on the ideas of Max Weber, Crook *et al.* argue that different aspects of society come to be judged in terms of different criteria. Science is judged in terms of truth; morality and law in terms of goodness and justice; and art in terms of beauty. Each sphere develops its own specialist institutions and occupations.

Initially, the patronage of the rich enabled people to become professional musicians, composers, sculptors and artists. Later, specialist institutions such as art schools developed to train future generations of cultural specialists. Other institutions, such as theatres, art galleries, and concert halls, were established to make cultural products more widely available.

Culture was therefore separated or differentiated from other aspects of life. It was produced by specialists, trained in particular institutions, and it was consumed in specific places. This formed the basis for distinguishing between **folk culture** (which could be found among ordinary people) and **high culture**, which was the product of these specialist individuals and institutions.

However, as modernity progressed, new types of popular culture developed, such as the music hall, the charabanc (coach) trip or the seaside holiday resort. In these, too, culture was differentiated from other areas of life, but it had no pretensions to being high culture.

There have been some attempts to break down the division between high culture and everyday life. Avant-garde artists have tried to shock people out of their cultural complacency by portraying everyday objects as art. For example, in 1917 Marcel Duchamp displayed a urinal as a work of art with the title 'Fountain'. He attributed the work to the sanitary engineer who designed the urinal. However, such protests against the splitting of art and life had little impact in modern societies.

2 According to Crook *et al.*, **rationalization** also shaped modern culture, but not as completely as differentiation. Music has been increasingly influenced by harmonic rationalization, in which mathematics has been used to help compose harmonic music. There has also been a considerable rationalization of the reproduction of music and other art forms.

Technology has been used to make it possible to recreate or copy culture. For example, the piano allowed the reproduction of a version of complex music on a single instrument. Radios and record players allowed broadcasts and copies of original music to be consumed more widely. Printing technology allowed the reproduction of works of art to become rationalized – you no longer relied upon the efforts of individual artists to see a copy of a picture.

While some have seen these developments as undermining the distinction between high culture and everyday life, Crook *et al.* disagree. People may be able to sit in their living room listening to Beethoven on their hi-fi while gazing at a print of the *Mona Lisa*, but this simply serves to reinforce the status of high culture. It gives legitimacy to the idea that certain individuals were the greatest artists or composers.

Nevertheless, in modernity the rationalization of culture can only proceed so far, since the individual creativity of the great artist is still valued.

3 The **commodification** of culture involves turning cultural products into commodities that can be readily bought and sold. From the viewpoint of mass

culture theories (see pp. 901–3) this undermines aesthetic values and threatens the purity of high art. It brings to the masses an inferior and debased culture which then threatens the unique qualities of high art.

Crook *et al.* do not agree with this view. To them the development of **taste** is a key feature of modern culture. Taste only develops when people have enough resources to make some choices about what they consume. In early modernity only the highest classes could do this, but as modernity progresses the possibility of choosing what to consume spreads to all classes. This does not undermine hierarchies of taste. The taste of higher social classes is still valued above that of lower classes. In modernity classical music is still seen as superior to the latest pop music.

Postmodernization

In modern societies, culture is differentiated from other areas of social life and high culture is differentiated from popular culture. However, **postmodernization** reverses these trends. According to Crook *et al.*, an intensification of some of the processes at work in modernity leads to postmodernization.

Differentiation, **rationalization** and **commodification** are superseded by **hyperdifferentiation**, **hypercommodification** and **hyper-rationalization**. Although each of these develops from, and intensifies the processes of, modernity, they have the effect of reversing some of the trends evident in modernity. This leads to a new type of culture. Crook *et al.* call this new culture postculture.

Hypercommodification

Hypercommodification involves all areas of social life becoming commodified. In modern societies certain areas of social life such as family life, your class background and community ties were not commercialized and were major sources of identity. They influenced what you consumed because they influenced taste. Thus, for example, different families from different classes and different localities would tend to eat different types of food, wear different types of clothes and buy different types of furniture. Hypercommodification undermines these differences.

First, all areas of social life are invaded by commodities. Family activities like eating are invaded by the marketing of products. Consumption increasingly takes place within the home and members of the same family become more inclined to consume different things. Often children have their own television sets, and they might sit in different rooms to their parents, watching different programmes and adverts, and even eating different foods.

Instead of a uniform family culture, each family member chooses their own lifestyle. Similarly, members of the same class no longer tend to share

the same tastes. They can increasingly choose from a range of **lifestyle options**. Different lifestyles themselves become freed from their association with specific groups. For example, people from many different backgrounds choose to live 'green' lifestyles which express their concern for the environment, or choose to follow particular sports or even particular teams.

According to Crook *et al.*, **style**, unlike taste, is not constrained or shaped by external social factors like class. Styles are systems of signs: the style you choose says something to others about what sort of a person you are. Styles are shaped only by personal preference – essentially everybody can become whoever they choose.

Hyper-rationalization

Hyper-rationalization involves the use of rationalized technology to spread cultural consumption more widely and to privatize it. Technology such as the Walkman and satellite TV allows greater individual choice about what you listen to or watch. Video and cassette recorders extend choice over when and where the cultural products you like are consumed. Again this allows individuals to choose their own lifestyle. Public cultural events such as theatres and music halls, where people gather to consume cultural products simultaneously, become less important.

Following the ideas of Baudrillard (see Chapter 15) Crook *et al.* argue that this erodes the distinction between **authentic** and **inauthentic culture**. Media images come to dominate society. Media copies and reproductions begin to replace the authentic, real thing they represent. Eventually images and signs lose their connection with reality and become what Baudrillard calls **simulacra** (see Chapter 15 for a definition of simulacra).

Hyperdifferentiation

Crook *et al.* argue that 'In postmodernization a thousand flowers bloom.' A fantastic variety of cultural forms develop, with no particular type being dominant. For example, popular music has fragmented into a wide variety of styles, each with its own audience choosing its own preferred style, to go with its chosen lifestyle. As variety becomes the order of the day, it becomes difficult for any particular style to claim to be superior to all others.

Furthermore, hypercommodification leads to the incorporation of high culture into cultural forms that have not traditionally enjoyed much prestige. For example, classical music is used as **background music** in advertising, films and television programmes.

The increased fragmentation of culture – **hyperdifferentiation** – leads ultimately to **dedifferentiation**, in which distinctions between different types

of culture break down. In particular, the distinction between high culture and popular culture is undermined in postmodernizing societies. Not only does high culture get incorporated into popular culture, but popular culture increasingly claims to be serious art. Each cultural style has its own devotees who see their own preferred styles and art forms as better than others. High culture no longer has an exclusive claim to legitimacy.

Conclusion

Crook *et al.* claim that postculture is characterized above all by fragmentation. Variety and choice are the main features of postculture where lifestyle preferences replace a hierarchy of tastes based on class and other social differences.

Crook *et al.* did not believe that postculture had become completely dominant at the time they were writing (1992). They saw postmodernization as an ongoing process, but did not deny that elements of modern culture remained important. Nevertheless, they clearly believed that postmodernization was gaining momentum, and envisaged a time when it would have largely undermined modern culture.

Dominic Strinati – postmodernism and popular culture

Crook *et al.* are enthusiastic advocates of the claim that contemporary societies are moving towards postmodernity. Dominic Strinati (1995) is much more sceptical. However, he does provide a commendably clear explanation and discussion of how theories of postmodernism analyse popular culture. He argues that there are five main features of postmodern analysis of popular culture, and he illustrates these arguments with reference to a variety of cultural products. He also examines factors that might have produced postmodern popular culture.

The main features of postmodernism

Strinati identifies the main features of postmodernism as the following:

- 1 The first is 'The breakdown of the distinction between culture and society'. This involves the development of a 'media-saturated society'. In such a society the mass media are extremely powerful. Rather than reflecting reality the media become so all-consuming that they create our sense of reality. Computer technology helps to create virtual realities which 'potentially replace their real life counterparts'. Increasingly, economic activity is concerned with buying and selling media images rather than physical products.
- 2 The second main feature of postmodernism is 'An emphasis on style at the expense of substance'. Thus,

particular products become popular because they have designer labels which evoke an attractive lifestyle, rather than because they are useful. Society develops a 'designer ideology'. Surface qualities assume more importance than anything deeper. For example, Strinati says that in popular culture:

surface and style, what things look like, playfulness and jokes, are said to predominate at the expense of content, substance and meaning. As a result, qualities like artistic merit, integrity, seriousness, authenticity, realism, intellectual depth and strong narratives tend to be undermined.

Strinati, 1995, p. 225

For example, a film will tend to be successful if it is visually appealing, whether the plot is any good or not.

- 3 There is a 'breakdown of the distinction between art and popular culture'. In postmodern culture 'anything can be turned into a joke, reference or quotation'. Thus, elements of what used to be thought of as 'high culture' become incorporated into popular culture. The pop artist Andy Warhol, for example, produced a famous print consisting of thirty representations of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. The work is called 'Thirty are better than One', and it undermines the special aura and uniqueness of the original by emphasizing how easy it is to produce endless copies of the print.

Strinati says that 'postmodern popular culture refuses to respect the pretensions and distinctiveness of art'. Art has become incorporated into everyday life in societies dominated by signs. Consequently, there is no longer anything special about art.

The critics of mass culture in the earlier decades of the century were deeply worried about just such a development (see pp. 901–3). If postmodernists are right, the worst fears of these critics have come true. However, postmodernists see no reason to be unhappy about this; they welcome the fun, spontaneity and variety of the new postmodern culture in which art is part of life.

- 4 A fourth feature of postmodern culture is the development of 'Confusions over time and space'. Following the ideas of David Harvey (see Chapter 15), Strinati believes that rapid travel, almost instantaneous communications, and the speed with which capital, information and cultures flow from society to society all lead to confusions over time and space. The media make it possible to witness events on the other side of the globe almost as if you were there. As a result people's sense of space becomes confused. Postmodern culture also confuses people's sense of time. For example, architecture is often nostalgic and incorporates styles from previous eras. Theme parks recreate the past and try to create the future. Postmodern films often avoid following a story from start to beginning (linear time), but jump around

between past, present and future in a confusing way. The title and content of the film *Back to the Future* show how conventional ideas of linear time can be undermined in postmodern culture.

- 5 Finally, postmodern culture involves 'The decline of metanarratives'. Drawing on the ideas of Lyotard (see Chapter 15), Strinati sees postmodernism as involving a decline in people's faith in any big stories, or big ideas about the world. Postmodernism is 'sceptical of any absolute, universal and all-embracing claim to knowledge', such as 'religion, science, art modernism and Marxism'. It denies that there is any sense of progress in history. In popular culture this manifests itself in the use of collage, where elements from very different sources are brought together in particular cultural artefacts. Postmodern films often mix different genres, and postmodern buildings mix different styles. The implicit message is that no style or genre is better than any other. Everything is equally valid and the search for a single truth is both pointless and dangerous.

Reasons for the emergence of postmodernism

Strinati identifies three main reasons for the emergence of postmodernism:

- 1 Capitalist societies have placed an increasing emphasis on consumerism. In the earlier stages of capitalism there was more emphasis on production, on developing the productive capacity of machinery, and on meeting people's basic needs. Advanced capitalist societies have, on average, much higher living standards and there is much more emphasis on getting people to consume products that can be produced in very high numbers. A more affluent population with more leisure time needs to be entertained and persuaded to spend money if companies are to continue to make profits. The media are central to these processes, and consequently media images increasingly dominate society.
- 2 'New middle-class occupations' have developed which have an interest in promoting postmodern culture. These occupations include design, marketing, advertising and creative jobs in the various media. These jobs involve persuading people about the importance of taste. Once people are persuaded of this, then they will need the expertise of those who claim to be experts in their fields, and they will usually access this expertise through the media.

Strinati also sees groups such as teachers, social workers, lecturers and therapists as important because of their involvement with 'notions of psychological and personal fulfilment and growth'. Such ideas also encourage people to take lifestyle seriously. They therefore encourage them to consume the goods and services required for the lifestyle that they decide is best for them.

Strinati concludes that, for the new occupations in the middle class, 'Their quest for cultural power leads

them towards postmodernism and away from the cultures of other classes, such as the high culture of the traditional middle-class intelligentsia.'

- 3 According to Strinati, postmodernism also comes about because of the 'erosion of collective and personal identities'. There has been a gradual disappearance of identities based upon such things as class, local communities, religion and the nation-state. Yet they have not been replaced by alternative sources of identity. People's identities become more personal and individual, and 'popular culture and the mass media come to serve as the only frames of reference available for the construction of collective and personal identities'. (See pp. 921–32 for a detailed discussion of identity.)

An evaluation of postmodern theories of culture

As well as describing postmodern theories of culture, Dominic Strinati also evaluates them. In doing so he raises a considerable number of problems with postmodern theories of popular culture in particular and culture in general:

- 1 Strinati argues that postmodernists greatly exaggerate their case in suggesting that the mass media 'take over "reality"'. He says, 'The mass media are important, but not that important.' He sees exaggerated claims about the importance of the media as a product of the ideology of those who make a living from the media. They are based on little empirical evidence; there is no reason to suppose that most people cannot distinguish between image and reality. For example, few people believe that the characters in soap operas are real. Postmodernism also fails to explain exactly why the media are so important, and it ignores other areas of social life, such as work and families, which are also important.
- 2 Postmodern theory also exaggerates the importance of the media in shaping what people consume. People do not just buy products because of their image or the designer label attached to them; they also buy them because they are useful. Furthermore, less affluent members of society simply cannot afford to buy expensive products for the kudos attached to a brand name. What is more, not all sections of society have a culture which attaches importance to the image of products.
- 3 Strinati questions the logic of postmodernism's claim that metanarratives are in decline. This is because he argues that postmodernism is itself a metanarrative. Strinati says that postmodernism:

presents a definite view of knowledge and its acquisition, together with a general account of the significant changes it sees occurring in modern societies. It presumes to tell us something true about the world, and knows why it is able to do this.

Strinati, 1995, p. 241

These are just the characteristics that postmodernists use to describe other metanarratives, of which they are so critical. The popularity of postmodernism therefore undermines the postmodernists' claim that metanarratives are in decline.

- 4 Strinati has more time for the postmodernists' claim that concepts of time and space have been affected by such things as faster travel and communications. However, he argues that some people have less opportunity to experience these changes than others. The poorer people of the world do not have access to computer technology, satellite communications or jet travel. In any case, some changes date back to the early decades of the century (for example, aeroplanes and the cinema), considerably before postmodernity is supposed to have developed.

As in other areas, postmodernists do not provide detailed evidence that people's consciousness has changed. There are no studies which actually show that people have confused ideas about space and time.

- 5 Strinati does believe that 'Postmodernist claims about the breakdown of the distinction between art and popular culture do have a certain plausibility.' However, he argues that these claims can only be applied to the culture of the new middle-class occupations which he sees as largely responsible for the emergence of postmodernism.

Generally people still find it possible to distinguish between what they consider art and what they see as popular culture. Furthermore, postmodernists themselves distinguish between 'modern' and 'postmodern' cultural products. If they can do this, then 'the potential for cultural discrimination must remain under postmodernism'.

If postmodernists prefer postmodern films, buildings, television programmes and so on to modern ones, it remains open for other groups of people to retain their own preferences, which may be quite different to those of postmodernists.

Strinati believes that 'Rather than dismantling the hierarchy of aesthetic and cultural taste, postmodernism erects a new one, placing itself at the top.' Postmodern cultural products often contain 'clever' references to a variety of styles and genres from previous eras. Only clever, well-informed people (particularly postmodernists), who are familiar with all these different styles and genres, can fully appreciate the subtleties of postmodern art and popular culture.

- 6 Finally, Strinati evaluates postmodern claims about actual changes in popular culture. He argues that postmodern elements are most common in advertising and architecture, but that in other areas they have had a more limited impact. He looks particularly at the cinema.

Strinati notes that many films, which can be seen as postmodern in some respects, can be seen as modern in other respects. For example, the *Back to the Future*

films may have confusions over space and time, but they also have strong narratives (story lines) – a feature supposed to be characteristic of modern films. Even *Blade Runner*, the archetypal postmodern film, is partly based upon themes that predate the emergence of postmodernism by many decades.

Blade Runner follows the theme of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, which explored the tragic consequences of trying to replicate human life (the characters in *Blade Runner* are 'replicants' – near-perfect reproductions of human beings).

Strinati believes that many of the supposedly postmodern aspects of the contemporary cinema are nothing new. For example, even early silent films parodied other genres, taking some ideas from music hall. Films which involve nostalgia for the past have also long been made. Westerns and gangster films are two examples.

Dominic Strinati concludes that there are many examples of a postmodern influence on aspects of

Identity

Introduction – the nature of social identity

Richard Jenkins argues that social identity is 'our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others' (Jenkins, 1996). Identity is something that is negotiable and is created in the process of human interaction. It involves making comparisons between people and therefore establishing similarities and differences between them. Those who are believed by themselves and others to be similar, share an identity, which is distinguishable from the identity of people who are believed to be different and who do not, therefore, share the same identity.

To Jenkins, 'social identity is about meanings', and these meanings are socially constructed rather than being about essential differences between people. For example, Jenkins discusses the transition to being an old-age pensioner or senior citizen. The change in identity and the social role that accompanies it are based upon an arbitrary distinction between those who are 64 and those who are 65, but it has a tremendous impact on a person's identity. Jenkins says:

Imagine, for example, the morning of your sixty-fifth birthday. With it, as well as birthday cards, will come retirement, a pension, a concessionary public transport pass, special rates every Tuesday at the hairdresser. ... Although it will be the same face you will see in the bathroom mirror, you will

popular culture, but they are only examples. They are not important or numerous enough to justify the rather grand and generalized claims made by many postmodernists. Strinati says, 'While it cannot be dismissed completely, postmodernism seems subject to severe theoretical and empirical limitations. It is certainly inadequate as a basis for developing a sociology of popular culture.'

This is partly because Strinati believes that any adequate theory must take account of two main factors: the tastes of audiences, and the need for the culture industry to make a profit. He says that 'it is doubtful whether power and control over production by themselves are sufficient to determine patterns of cultural consumption.' However, they do have an important role in determining what is produced: a role that is wholly neglected by postmodernists. (For an example of a theory of postmodernity which does not neglect power and control over production, see the work of David Harvey, discussed in Chapter 15.)

no longer be quite the person that you were yesterday. Nor can you ever be again.

Jenkins, 1996

According to Jenkins, identity is an integral part of social life. It is only by distinguishing the identities of different groups that people are able to relate to other people. An awareness of different identities provides some indication of what sort of person you might be dealing with, and therefore how you can relate to them.

The understanding you have of different identities might be limited, or wrong altogether, but it is a vital part of social life and it makes interaction possible. Jenkins comments that:

More often than not, men and women going about their everyday lives are concerned with specific social identities. We talk, for example, about whether people are born gay or become gay as a result of the way they have been brought up. About what it means to be 'grown up'. About what the difference is between Canadians and Americans. We observe the family who have just moved in around the corner and shake our heads: what can you expect, they come from the wrong part of town. We watch the television news and jump to all sorts of conclusions about current events on the basis of identifications such as 'Muslim', 'fundamentalist Christian', or whatever.

Jenkins, 1996, p. 5

Jenkins concludes that 'Without social identity, there is, in fact, no society.'

Although most sociologists would agree with Jenkins that identity is an integral and crucial part of society, there is disagreement amongst them about the factors that shape identity in contemporary societies and the ways in which the nature of social identity has developed over time. An influential way of thinking about identity has been suggested by Stuart Hall, and it provides a convenient starting point for a discussion of the controversies surrounding the nature of identity.

Stuart Hall – three concepts of identity

In 'The question of cultural identity' (1992), Stuart Hall argues that ideas on identity have passed through three main stages in which particular conceptions of identity were dominant in thinking about society. These are:

- 1 The Enlightenment subject
- 2 The sociological subject
- 3 The post-modern subject

Pre-modern identities

Hall argues that the early stages of modernity 'gave rise to a new and decisive form of individualism, at the centre of which stood a new conception of the individual subject and its identity' (Hall, 1992). In pre-modern societies identities were largely based around traditional structures, particularly related to religion. Your position in society and your identity came from the position you were born into, which was seen as reflecting the will of God. People were not regarded as being unique individuals with their own identity, but simply part of the 'great chain of being'. This concept saw every living thing as having a place in the scheme of things. There was a hierarchy stretching from God at the pinnacle, through kings and less significant human beings, to animals, plants and inanimate objects at the bottom. Your identity came from your place in the scheme of things rather than from any individual or personal attributes.

The Enlightenment subject

However, with the advent of modernity, this changed. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries a new conception of identity became dominant. This new conception of identity had two key features:

- 1 The individual subject was seen as 'indivisible'. Each person had an identity in their own right, and this identity was unified and could not be broken down into smaller, constituent parts.
- 2 The identity of each individual was unique.

The individual was not part of something bigger – the great chain of being – but was seen as having a distinct identity of their own.

According to Hall, this conception of identity stemmed from the ideas of the French philosopher, Descartes (1596–1650).

Descartes believed that there was a basic distinction between the **mind** and **matter**. He had a **dualistic** conception of humans: they were divided into two separate parts, the mind and the body. Each individual's mind was separate from every other individual's mind; consequently each individual was unique. The distinctiveness of the individual mind was expressed in Descartes' famous saying, 'Cogito, ergo, sum' – 'I think, therefore I am.'

The individual, in this conception of identity, was a unified, whole person with the ability to think for themselves. The individual saw themselves as distinct and separate from other people, complete in their own right. The individual was rational, able to work out things for themselves on the basis of logic, and not limited by their position in society or traditional beliefs. Hall describes it thus:

The Enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or 'identical' with itself – throughout the individual's existence. The essential centre of the self was a person's identity.

Hall, 1992, p. 275

The sociological subject

By the nineteenth century a more sociological conception of the subject and individual identity began to develop. Hall sees this as resulting from changes in society.

As industrialization and urbanization began to take hold, society became more complicated. It became increasingly based upon organizations and structures which shaped the lives of individuals. By the early twentieth century, for example, companies run by individual entrepreneurs were giving way to corporations owned by shareholders and run by complex administrations. Furthermore, 'The individual citizen became enmeshed in the bureaucratic and administrative machineries of the modern state.'

Each individual was no longer seen as being so unique and separate from other individuals. Rather, the relationship between the individual and society was mediated through 'group processes and ... collective norms'. For example, an individual's identity was seen as being tied up with their membership of a

particular social class, a specific occupational grouping, their origins in a particular region, their nationality, and so on.

Symbolic interactionism and identity

Hall sees the theory of **symbolic interactionism** as a good example of this conception of individual identity. From the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism, individual identity is only formed in interaction with others. A person's view of themselves, or **self-concept**, is partly a product of how others see that person.

The symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead called the self-concept the 'I' (see Chapter 15). Another interactionist, Charles Horton Cooley (discussed in Hall, 1992), saw humans as having a 'looking-glass self'; their sense of who they were reflected the reactions of other people to them.

From the interactionist viewpoint, people still possessed their own individuality, but it was not an individuality wholly distinct from society. Identity acts as a bridge between the social and the purely individual. By possessing a particular identity, individuals internalize certain norms and values that accompany that identity. It allows their behaviour to be predictable to others and in turn makes behaviour in society more patterned and regular.

This sort of view can be illustrated with the example of social class. A particular class identity would encourage people to behave in particular ways. Traditional working-class and middle-class identities differed, and they were associated with different subcultures (see pp. 75–6). The existence of these subcultures gave substance to and reinforced the class structure of society. Hall comments that 'Identity thus stitches (or, to use a current medical metaphor, "sutures") the subject into the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable.'

This general approach to identity was not confined to interactionists. For example, functionalists such as Parsons saw identity in terms of the existence of social roles which fitted individual personalities into the social system (see Chapter 15).

Change in late modernity – the postmodern subject

According to Hall, the symbolic interactionist theory of identity and the idea of the sociological subject might have been appropriate analyses in modernity, but they have become increasingly inappropriate in late modernity or the postmodern era (Hall is somewhat unclear as to whether the contemporary era is late-modern or postmodern).

According to Hall, contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by the existence of

fragmented identities. People no longer possess a single, unified conception of who they are, but instead possess 'several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities'. This fragmentation of identity has a number of sources.

Modernity and change

Modern societies have always been characterized by rapid change. In late-modern societies the pace of change increases, which makes it difficult for people to retain a single, unified sense of who they are.

New social movements

In the past, social class provided something of a 'master identity', which overarched other identities and formed the basis for political conflict. However, in the 1960s and 1970s people began to organize around issues other than class. New social movements developed (see pp. 643–7) concerned with a variety of issues and identities. Hall lists 'feminism, black struggles, national liberation, anti-nuclear and ecological movements' as examples. Instead of people feeling part of a single class, their identity became fragmented in terms of their gender, ethnicity, religion, age, nationality, views on ecology, and so on.

Identity politics

With the rise of new social movements, identity itself became a political issue. **Identity politics**, as it became known, is concerned with the differences between groups of people, and with allowing individuals to express those differences. It emphasizes the importance of hearing different voices, particularly those of oppressed groups such as gays and lesbians, black women, the disabled, and so on.

Feminism

Feminism had a particularly important role. It paved the way in opening up what were previously thought of as private issues (like housework and domestic violence) to public debate. Feminism therefore 'exposed, as a political and social question, the issue of how we are formed and produced as gendered subjects. That is to say, it politicized subjectivity, identity and the process of identification (as men/women, mothers/fathers, sons/daughters).'

In its early phases feminism replaced the idea of all humans having the same identity, 'mankind', with the idea that men and women were different. It encouraged women to unite as 'sisters' and tried to substitute gender as the 'master identity' instead of class. However, more recently, difference feminism has emphasized the differences between women (for example, women from different ethnic origins). This has led to a further fragmentation of identity (see pp. 519–23 for a discussion of difference feminism).

Disciplinary power and surveillance

Another important factor in fragmenting identities is highlighted in the work of Foucault (see pp. 635–9). According to Foucault, societies were becoming increasingly characterized by 'disciplinary power' and 'surveillance'. The behaviour of individuals was increasingly watched, monitored and, where necessary, punished. Such techniques originated in prisons and hospitals, but have since spread to encompass many aspects of society. Since people are monitored and treated as individuals rather than as members of social groups, they become increasingly isolated. This makes it more difficult for them to form coherent identities based upon social interaction.

Globalization

A final, very important, factor in creating fragmented identities is the process of globalization. Hall suggests a number of ways in which globalization might affect identity.

The ease and frequency with which people move around the world, and improvements in communications and the 'global marketing of styles, places and images' can lead to a 'cultural supermarket effect'. People are no longer confined to developing identities based upon the place in which they live, but can choose from a very wide range of different identities. They can adopt the clothes, ways of speaking, values and lifestyles of any group they choose.

On the other hand, global consumerism can also lead to increasing homogeneity, or similarity, between people. Products are marketed worldwide, and the most successful (for example, Coca-Cola) can be found more or less anywhere.

There are therefore contradictory trends within globalization, but both can undermine previously existing identities. The homogenization of the global consumer undermines identities rooted in membership of particular social groups. The ability to make greater choices about identity means that people living in close proximity and even belonging to the same social groups can have quite different identities. Globalization thus opens up a number of possibilities.

Globalization and different sources of identity

Hall then goes on to review the actual effects of globalization on identity. He argues that in modern societies nationality was an important source of identity. Most nation-states emphasized the importance of the nation and tried to use national identity to create solidarity among citizens of different classes, ethnic origins and so on. With globalization, this has not proved so easy or effective. There have been three main responses to globalization in relation to nationality:

- 1 In some places people have tried to **reaffirm national identity** as a defensive mechanism. They have perceived a threat to their national identity, from, for example, immigration. Thus, in Britain, such a reaction has created 'a revamped Englishness, an aggressive little Englandism, and a retreat to ethnic absolutism in an attempt to shore up the nation'.
- 2 The first reaction to globalization is found among ethnic majorities, but ethnic minorities sometimes react in **defensive** ways as well. In response to racism and exclusion, ethnic minorities have sometimes placed a renewed emphasis upon their ethnic identities and culture. In Britain this has involved 're-identification with cultures of origin (in the Caribbean, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan); the construction of strong counter-ethnicities – as in the symbolic identification of second generation youth, through the symbols and motifs of Rastafarianism, with their African origin'.
- 3 A third reaction to globalization is the construction of **new identities**. A British example is the construction of a 'black' identity, embracing British Afro-Caribbeans and Asians. The black British identity represents an alternative to the re-identification with cultural origins, as a response to racism and exclusion. In this case identity becomes hybrid, mixing more than one existing identity into a new identity (see pp. 272–6).

The first two responses to globalization have had the effect of reviving ethnicity as a source of identity, often in opposition to existing nationalism. In several parts of the world ethnic groups have demanded their own nation-states, as bigger nation-states (such as the USSR and Yugoslavia) have broken up. (This has led to considerable violence and even civil war in places such as Bosnia and Kosovo.)

Hall sees this strident nationalism, based upon real or imagined ethnic differences, as a worrying trend. He argues that the idea of **ethnic purity** is largely a myth. Nearly all populations come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. This has become increasingly true in the twentieth century with the large-scale migration of great numbers of people. Most cultures are hybrid ones and attempts to create 'pure' ethnic identities are very dangerous in such circumstances. (See pp. 271–2 for more discussion of Hall's ideas on ethnicity and nationality, and pp. 222–82 for a general discussion of ethnicity, nationality and identity.)

Conclusion

Hall concludes that, in line with postmodern theory, identity has become **decentred**. Individuals can no longer find a core or centre to their identity, based on class or existing nation-states. Globalization in particular has had 'a pluralizing impact on identities, producing a variety of possibilities and new positions of identification, and making identities more

positional, more political, more plural and diverse; less fixed, unified or trans-historical'. It is this uncertainty and diversity that have led some groups to make a more stable or unified identity by trying to create a renewed emphasis upon their ethnicity.

Zygmunt Bauman – 'From pilgrim to tourist – or a short history of identity'

Zygmunt Bauman (1996) goes much further than Hall in advocating a postmodern view of identity. According to Bauman, identity has not just become fragmented, it has ceased to have any stable base whatsoever. Identity has become simply a matter of choices, and not even choices that are necessarily consistent or regular. Individuals can change their identity as and when they choose.

Modern identity as pilgrimage

According to Bauman, under modernity identity could be seen as similar to a pilgrimage. In a pilgrimage a person maps out their future life. They have a goal – to reach the place of pilgrimage. All of their actions are geared towards achieving that goal. They must not be distracted along the way by enjoying hospitality or engaging in leisure activities. They need a singleness of purpose. They must treat the world around them as if it were a desert, free from distractions. Furthermore, in the desert sand they can see their footprints stretching back into the distance, reassuring them about how far they have come.

To Bauman, the formation of identity in modern societies was very much like a pilgrimage. People's life strategies were based upon having a clear sense of who they wanted to become. Their lives were geared towards achieving their desired identity. This identity was usually related to their occupation. They worked in this job and tried to have a successful career. They mapped out their future, looking ahead to achieving their career goals, and looking backwards to see how far they had come since embarking on their career.

Postmodernity – 'the world inhospitable to pilgrims'

Pilgrims require a degree of certainty in the world. They have to know that the place of pilgrimage will be there when they arrive, otherwise the pilgrimage will be pointless. Postmodernity undermines pilgrimage as a life strategy by creating uncertainty.

In postmodern societies change is so rapid that there can be no certainty that particular positions, or even particular professions, will still exist in 10, 20 or 30 years' time. Bauman says:

not only have jobs-for-life disappeared, but trades and professions which have acquired the confusing habit of appearing from nowhere and vanishing without notice can hardly be lived as Weberian 'vocations' – and to rub salt into the wound, the demand for the skills needed to practice such professions seldom lasts as long as the time needed to acquire them.

Bauman, 1996, p. 24

In this situation there is no point in embarking on a pilgrimage. The destination – the job that a successful career will lead to – will have disappeared long before getting there. Because jobs change so rapidly, a person's career achievements so far may well be irrelevant to future jobs and will quickly be forgotten. Similarly, for the pilgrim in a desert, a storm may well come along and blow the sand around to cover up the tracks. The pilgrim can no longer see how far they have progressed.

Postmodern life strategies

In this situation new life strategies are required. These strategies abandon the idea of creating any single, central or permanent identity. Instead, people change their identity at will, putting little commitment into achieving an identity which may at any time become obsolete. Bauman identifies four postmodern life strategies:

- 1 The **stroller** (or *flâneur*) is somebody who strolls around cities observing and being entertained by the spectacle of city life. He or she has no particular objective in mind but strolls simply as a leisure pursuit. The stroller is a postmodern 'playful consumer' who has replaced the 'heroic producer' (or worker) of modernity. Shopping malls have been created as the haunt of the postmodern stroller. Shopping malls are there so that you can 'stroll while you shop and ... shop while you stroll'. You can sample an endless range of products and consume whatever you wish, construct whatever identity you choose, and change it the following day if you want. With developments such as multi-channel television and the Internet the stroller does not even have to leave the comfort of their armchair to enjoy their pastime.
- 2 The second life strategy is that of the **vagabond**. In past times, the vagabond wandered from place to place refusing to be tied down to any one place. The authorities disliked the vagabonds because they were unpredictable. They had no particular goals in their wandering so you could never predict where they would turn up. This was quite different from the utterly predictable movements of the pilgrim. The vagabond is always a stranger wherever they wander, and has no settled place in the world. In a postmodern world it makes sense to wander from

identity to identity without settling on any one. Indeed postmodern society makes it more or less impossible to settle. Bauman says:

Now there are few 'settled' places left. The 'forever settled' residents woke up to find the places (places in the land, places in society and places in life), to which they 'belong', no longer existing or no longer accommodating, neat streets turn mean, factories vanish together with jobs, skills no longer find buyers, knowledge turns into ignorance, professional experience becomes liability, secure networks of relations fall apart and foul the place with putrid waste.

Bauman, 1996, p. 29

It is little wonder that becoming a wandering vagabond, changing identity at will, becomes an attractive option.

- 3 The **tourist** represents the third strategy. Like the vagabond, the tourist moves from place to place. However, their movements are a little more purposeful. They know where they want to go. But they are not like the pilgrim. They do not travel to meet some ultimate goal. They simply go to places to gain new experiences, to see somewhere different or do something they have not done before.

In postmodern societies people do not devote themselves to working on creating and cementing a particular identity. Like the tourist seeking new experiences, the equivalent postmodern life strategy involves trying out new identities and always looking for something new to sample.

- 4 The final strategy is that of the **player**. This involves treating life as a game. Games are played to win, but the result has no lasting consequences. Win or lose, you forget the last game and move on to another one. Similarly, in postmodern societies people can play the game of having particular identities for a time. (For example, they might be a left-wing radical student in their youth but change their politics in middle age.)

While a person will try to play each identity game well, that will not stop them from changing the game and playing at a new identity once they decide a particular game is over.

Conclusion

Bauman concludes that:

All four intertwining and interpenetrating postmodern life strategies have in common that they tend to render human relations fragmentary ... and discontinuous; they are all up in arms against 'strings-attached' and long-lasting consequences, and militate against the construction of lasting networks of mutual duties and obligations.

Bauman, 1996, p. 33

There are no solid, lasting identities. The only duty of the postmodern citizen is to 'lead an enjoyable life' by changing identity at will.

Evaluation of Hall and Bauman

Despite the differences between them, Stuart Hall and Zygmunt Bauman both argue that there has been a general movement away from relatively stable identities, based upon social factors such as class, towards more fragmented identities. Bauman in particular stresses the extent to which people can choose identities, while Hall places more emphasis on the increasing importance of ethnicity in shaping identity. These views have been criticized on a number of grounds:

- 1 Some sociologists deny that class has lost its importance as a source of identity. For example, Marshall, Newby, Rose and Vogler (1988) argue that in Britain people still see themselves as members of classes and that class continues to influence people's beliefs as well as their life chances (see pp. 88–9).

Similarly, in a discussion of class, politics and identity, Frank McDonough argues that 'pronouncing the death of class in British society does seem premature' (McDonough, 1997). McDonough accepts that there have been some changes in, for example, working-class life, including a growth in consumerism. However:

this cultural revolution has not completely led to the working class no longer feeling working class. When account is taken of what the working class say about class, we find they still do not feel middle class. They still believe that class has a detrimental impact on their life. They still consider class to be an important part of British life.

McDonough, 1997, p. 223

McDonough also believes that class divisions remain important in British politics.

- 2 Some feminists argue that gender remains the dominant source of identity. Although difference feminists stress the variety of identities that women have (see pp. 519–23), radical feminists continue to see gender as the principal source of identity, as well as the main source of exploitation in patriarchal societies (see pp. 136–7 and 145–7 for discussions of radical feminism). They therefore contradict Bauman's view that identities are freely chosen rather than related to social factors, and they suggest that gender is a more important source of identity than Hall's work seems to imply.
- 3 Richard Jenkins (1996) argues against Hall's view that **reflexivity** – reflecting upon your identity – is distinctively modern. According to Jenkins, long before modernity people were self-conscious about their identity and would seek to change it. Jenkins says:

Saint Augustine's Confessions, written more than 1,500 years ago, is a testament to the possibilities for re forging the self, offered as an example for others. Going back nearly another thousand years, one can understand Buddhism as a project for the reformation of selfhood.

Jenkins, 1996, p. 10

To Jenkins there is nothing new about being self-conscious about your identity – it is a universal feature of being human.

- 4 Jenkins also believes that writers such as Bauman greatly exaggerate the degree to which identities are fragmented, short-lived and freely chosen in contemporary societies. He is as sceptical about the claim that there is a distinctive postmodern type of identity as he is about the claim that modernity ushered in a radical change in identity.

Jenkins accepts that there have been some changes in identity – for example, feminism has increased the importance of gender as a source of identity – but he denies that the changes are fundamental. He says that 'Most commentators on postmodernism are on a historicist mission by any other name, substituting a meta-narrative of fragmentation for the old story of progress. In the pursuit of such grand themes, the mundane is likely to be overlooked! Jenkins is accusing postmodernists of doing exactly what they object to other theorists doing – producing grand theories or metanarratives which are not soundly based.

Unlike postmodernists, Jenkins believes that identity remains rooted in social experience and the membership of social groups, and that it is not something that can just be changed at will. His ideas will now be examined.

Richard Jenkins – identity as a social product

Individual and collective identity

Richard Jenkins argues that identities contain elements of the 'individually unique' and the 'collectively shared' (Jenkins, 1996). While each individual has an identity which is personal to them, those identities are shaped through membership of social groups. The individual elements of identity emphasize difference, the collective elements similarities, but the two are closely related.

Using the ideas of symbolic interactionists such as George Herbert Mead (see Chapter 15), Jenkins argues that identity is formed in the process of socialization. Through this process people learn to distinguish the socially significant similarities and differences between themselves and others.

In childhood, certain identities take on primary importance and are relatively stable throughout

people's lives. Jenkins says that 'selfhood, humanness, **gender**, and, under some circumstances, kinship and **ethnicity**, are primary identities, more robust and resilient to change in later life than other identities'.

Although all social identities can change, they are much less easy to change than postmodernists such as Bauman suggest. Furthermore, 'social identity is never unilateral' – people's identities are always formed in relationship to other people.

Drawing on the ideas of the interactionist Erving Goffman, Jenkins argues that in everyday life people are concerned to manage impressions of themselves – to give the impression of themselves they want others to see. Identities are formed as people try to get others to see them as they want to be seen. They may or may not be successful. If unsuccessful they may find it difficult to sustain the identity they prefer. (These ideas are based partly on labelling theory – see pp. 372–6.)

Identities are not just concerned with our own impressions of ourselves, but also with our impressions of others, and others' impressions of us. Identity is both **internal** – what we think our own identity is – and **external** – how others see us. Identities are formed and stabilized in a dialectical relationship between these internal and external factors – they interact to produce an identity.

External factors – how others see us and react to us – may contradict and undermine, or support and strengthen our view of ourselves. Either way, identity emerges out of this relationship between ourselves and others. Jenkins says:

Your external definition of me is an inexorable part of my internal definition of myself – even if only in the process of rejection or resistance – and vice versa. Both processes are among the routine everyday practices of actors. Nor is one more significant than the other.

Jenkins, 1996, p. 27

Power and identity

To Jenkins, identity formation is not simply related to individual interactions. It is also related to larger social groups. Interaction leads to the construction of boundaries, or dividing lines, between different social groups which carry different identities. For example, the distinction between men and women, and between working class, middle class and underclass, has implications for people's identities.

The ability to claim identities for yourself and to attribute particular identities to others is essentially a question of power. Some groups have more power than other groups to claim identities for themselves and to attribute identities to others. For example, the poor and the unemployed, living in inner-city areas, may have little power to resist being seen as part of an 'underclass'.

Furthermore, identities are closely related to social positions, particularly in organizations. Organizations classify people by job title and rank and people are not simply free to choose their own position within organizations. A cleaner at the BBC cannot simply choose to become Director General in order to change his or her identity.

The existence of identities associated with particular social groups and positions in organizations means that identity is never completely fluid and simply a matter of choice. Jenkins says, 'Social identities exist and are acquired and allocated within power relations. Identity is something *over* which struggles take place and *with* which strata-gems are advanced.'

The Black Power movement in the USA, and feminist and gay liberation movements are examples of groups organizing to change the widely-held perceptions of particular social identities. They were not simply the struggles of individuals to gain a more positive social identity. They were (and are) the struggles of social groups which sought a more positive social identity for the group as a whole.

Conclusion and evaluation

While Jenkins's views have some differences to those of Hall (for example, over whether reflexivity first developed with modernity), they are particularly antagonistic towards the claims of postmodernists such as Bauman.

Jenkins's work seems to be on strong ground in arguing that humans are not simply free to choose their own identity, that some identities (such as gender) are not easy to change, and that identities are social as well as individual. He puts forward a strong case in arguing that any change in the nature of identity associated with a supposed shift to postmodernity, has been exaggerated. However, some sociologists argue for a position between that of Bauman and that of Jenkins. The work of one such sociologist will now be considered.

Harriet Bradley – *Fractured Identities*

In a review of studies of identity and inequality, Harriet Bradley argues that neither modern nor postmodern conceptions of identity are adequate on their own. She says, 'A key objective is to pull together classical or modernist approaches to understanding inequalities with the newer perspectives inspired by postmodernism and post-structuralism' (Bradley, 1997).

As a starting point, Bradley identifies a number of differences between these two approaches.

Modernist and postmodern approaches to identity

- 1 Modernist approaches emphasize the importance of structures (such as class structures or patriarchy) in explaining identity. Postmodern approaches emphasize choice.
- 2 Modernist approaches tend to suggest that society is **polarizing** (for example, between rich and poor). Postmodern approaches see societies, and the identities of its members, **fragmenting** into many different groups.
- 3 Modernist approaches tend to see class or gender as key sources of identity. Postmodern approaches often argue that class is disappearing. They deny that women are in any sense a unified group with a single identity. They argue that there are numerous different sources of identity. More stress is placed in postmodern thinking on 'race', ethnicity, nationality, culture and religion, as diverse, but interconnected, sources of identity.
- 4 Modernist approaches see societies as relatively predictable, with a degree of social order. Postmodern approaches emphasize 'chaos and confusion, the limitless welter of apparently unique events'.
- 5 Modernist approaches stress material sources of power, particularly control over resources such as money. Postmodern approaches emphasize the importance of the cultural and symbolic. From the postmodern point of view, power stems from the control over discourse – over how people talk and think about issues or social groups. Meanings are seen as central.

The problems of modernist and postmodern approaches

Bradley believes that neither modernist nor postmodern positions on any of these issues are entirely satisfactory. For example, she says, 'Societies are chaotic, but also orderly; behaviour is infinitely variable, but also regular and predictable; social relations change, but are also stable and persistent.'

Similarly, she argues that **structured social inequalities** remain important; they have not disappeared. However, such inequalities no longer shape identities in as straightforward a way as they used to; there is more fluidity and choice involved in identity. But choice is not absolute: it is constrained by the existence of certain **dynamic** relationships. Bradley prefers the term 'dynamic' to the term 'structure', because she believes that the idea of structure exaggerates the degree to which social relationships are solid and fixed. There are, for example, class dynamics which affect people's life chances and identities, but these do not stand still. Class dynamics are in constant process of change.

Furthermore, power does not just come from meanings and discourse, important though these are.

Bradley says, 'It would be nice if the social world were no more than a contestation of meanings, so that, merely by renaming the world, we could change it.' But this is not the case. A number of feminists have contributed to 'rewriting history from female points of view; yet it must be acknowledged to have had as yet rather little effect on the massive exploitation of women by entrepreneurs around the world'. She goes on: 'men are able to dominate women not only by dominating them in discourse, but also by controlling the distribution of social wealth' – for example, by giving them lower-paid jobs.

Nevertheless, exploitation cannot begin to be challenged until oppressed groups are able to attack the discourses that portray the oppression as inevitable or desirable. Women had to challenge the discourse of female inferiority before liberation of women became a possibility; black people had to challenge the discourse of slavery, and so on. Bradley argues that 'both materiality and meaning are aspects of constraining power relations', and it makes no sense to emphasize one to the exclusion of the other.

Four aspects of inequality

In her study, Bradley examines four aspects of inequality: **class, gender, 'race' and ethnicity** and **age**. Although she sees these as the most important types of inequality and sources of identity, she accepts that there are other important social divisions: examples include sexuality and disability.

Although these inequalities and sources of identity can be analysed separately, in practice they interact with each other in a dynamic way. She says:

It has become almost a commonplace to say that classes are gendered and that gender relations are class-specific. Similarly the other dimensions of 'race'/ethnicity and age impinge on individual class and gender experience and in any particular concrete example it is hard to separate out the different elements.

Bradley, 1997, p. 19

Bradley does not see any one source of inequality as being of primary importance. She sees all as significant. This contrasts with Marxists who see class as central, feminists who see gender as central, and some anti-racists who believe that 'race'/ethnicity is most important.

Inequalities and identities

How do these inequalities relate to identity? Bradley does not believe that there is a straightforward relationship between inequality and identity. The importance of inequalities for identity varies over time and with individual circumstances.

Bradley accepts that postmodernists have a point in arguing that there is a good deal of choice over identity and that identities are to some extent fragmented. However, Bradley still sees identities as rooted in membership of social groups. It will be difficult for a young Afro-Caribbean woman to see herself as white, upper-class, elderly or male.

Furthermore, social factors tend to bring certain identities to prominence while reducing the significance of others. Although precise predictions about the identities that people will adopt are impossible, it is possible to discern more general trends. Bradley says:

For example, it is suggested that changes in work and the break-up of old urban communities are currently acting to weaken class identities. Or again, for Afro-Caribbeans in Britain 'race' is arguably a more potent source of identity than class because it is so visible.

Bradley, 1997

Three levels of identity

Identities tend to be grounded in inequalities, social divisions and differences. However, the importance of particular inequalities, divisions and differences for identity varies from place to place, from time to time, and from individual to individual. Bradley therefore believes that it is useful to conceive of identity as working at three different levels:

- 1 **Passive identities** are 'potential identities'. The potential exists for them to become important, in the way that individuals see themselves and others see them, but the identity is lying largely dormant. Bradley sees class identity in this way. Most British people accept that class inequalities exist, but most of the time they do not see themselves as members of a class. However, events or circumstances can raise consciousness of class and its importance as a source of identity.
- 2 **Active identities** are those which individuals are conscious of and which provide a base for their actions. They are positive elements for an individual's self identification although we do not necessarily think of ourselves continually in terms of any single identity. For example, a woman who is experiencing sexual harassment from a man is likely to respond to the experience in terms of her gender identity, but at other times another identity might be to the fore.
- 3 **Politicized identities** exist where they provide 'a more constant base for action and where individuals constantly think of themselves in terms of an identity'. Such identities are formed through political action, through campaigners highlighting the importance of the identity and using it as a basis for **organizing** collective action. For example, feminists succeeded in transforming gender into a politicized identity for many women in the 1970s and 1980s; and at times gay rights campaigners have achieved the same kind of politicized identity for many gays and lesbians.

Having outlined her general theory of identity, Bradley then goes on to examine the significance of class, gender, 'race'/ethnicity and age in producing identities in contemporary Britain.

Class and identity

As discussed above, Bradley does not see class as the strongest source of identity in contemporary Britain. She sees it as being mainly a source of passive identity. This is partly because class is less visible and obvious in the everyday world than age, 'race'/ethnicity and gender. However, Bradley does not agree with the argument of postmodernists that class is dying out or disappearing. Rather, there is evidence of class both **polarizing** and **fragmenting**.

Bradley quotes a number of studies which show that, far from being reduced, inequalities in countries such as Britain are increasing. Put simply, the rich are getting much richer, while the poor are becoming slightly worse off (see pp. 46–9 and 334–6 for summaries of studies that reach similar findings). This creates the potential for class to be an increasingly **important source of identity**.

However, Bradley also detects evidence that class is fragmenting. She argues that Weber's ideas on class status and party (see pp. 36–9) can be used as a basis for understanding a situation in which there is a plurality of classes which are cross-cut by different status groups (such as ethnic groups), and in which many political organizations and pressure groups are no longer based on class.

The class structure has fragmented, with the development of an 'underclass' (which Bradley sees as a marginal group outside the class structure), and a big increase in self-employment. Furthermore, 'Classes are split by region, public or private sector membership, gender or ethnic origins, amongst other things.'

Bradley therefore concludes that 'neither class, as a set of lived economic relationships, nor class analysis, as a set of social categories, is dead. But there must be recognition of how class relations are shaped by other forms of inequality.'

Gender and identity

In discussing theories of gender, Bradley notes a move away from theories which saw women as a single group, united by their common experience of oppression, towards theories which see women (and indeed men) as being fragmented into different groups. The former type of theory included radical, Marxist and liberal feminisms (see pp. 136–8), while the latter sort includes Black, postmodern and difference feminism (see pp. 138–9, 157–63 and 519–23).

Bradley believes that both types of theory are important and that both provide insight into the formation of identity. She notes that some commen-

tators in the popular media believe that inequality between women and men is a thing of the past. Bradley denies that this is so, and believes that the common experience of disadvantage and sexism provides a basis for a common identity for women.

However, not all women experience disadvantage to the same extent or in the same ways. For example, Black feminists have suggested that the family is experienced differently by white and black women. White feminists see the family as a source of patriarchal oppression. Black feminists experience the black family (which is quite likely to be headed by a woman) as a source of solidarity and as a bulwark against oppression.

To Bradley, gender – both as a general category, and in terms of differences between groups of women and groups of men – is a very important source of identity in contemporary Britain. Furthermore, gender is an active politicized identity for women as a result of the influence of feminism.

More recently, gender has started to become politicized for men. Men used to take the experience of being male for granted – it was seen as the norm and being female was seen as a deviation from the norm. However, masculinity has started to be politicized, with the development of men's movements, and demands for male rights (for example, rights over access to children after divorce), and in a 'backlash' against feminism (see p. 185).

That does not mean that all men and all women experience gender as their main source of identity in all circumstances. Like other sources of identity, it interacts with a variety of other sources. There is a plurality of ways to be a woman or to be a man – as well as class and 'race'/ethnicity, age and sexuality are also important. For example, Bradley argues that:

For a post-pubescent exploring the pleasures (and problems) of her newly sexualized body in relation to young men, the experience of womanhood is quite different from that of an ageing post-menopausal woman, struggling to adjust to bodily changes in a culture that puts a high value on youth and fertility.

Bradley, 1997

Similarly, gay men and lesbians will have different experiences of masculinity or femininity, and have rather different identities from their heterosexual counterparts. Thus, while gender is a crucial source of identity, its interactions with other sources of identity are very important.

'Race'/ethnicity and identity

Like gender, 'race'/ethnicity has become a more important source of identity in contemporary societies than class, and it is more likely to produce

active and politicized identities. Sometimes this is partly due to the visibility of skin colour differences between supposed 'races', but this is not always the case. For example, the violence and 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia have occurred between different white ethnic groups.

To a considerable extent the importance of 'race'/ethnicity as a source of identity depends upon how it is used politically to mobilize groups and provide them with a sense of belonging and history. For example, the Black Power movement of the 1960s led to many British and American people from diverse non-white ethnic groups identifying with an oppressed, non-white minority. However, by the 1970s a stronger sense of African identity had developed among black British and American people. By the 1980s:

the move towards ethnic particularism might lead people to identify more narrowly, say with a specific Caribbean island or region in the Indian sub-continent. In the 1990s political thinking ... may encourage people to adopt 'hyphenated' identities: Mexican-American, British-Indian and so forth.

Bradley, 1997, p. 137

This can lead to people having somewhat confused ethnic identities, particularly if they move from a former colony in which they were born to a Western society. Once again, though, political mobilization is important. For example, the identity of a British Muslim has assumed more importance than other identities (such as being Pakistani) among some people of Asian origin in Britain as a result of the revival of Islam as a world religion (see p. 492 for a discussion of Islamic revival).

For dominant ethnic groups, such as white people in Britain or the USA, ethnic identity is a rather less politicized identity. It tends to be taken as the norm and only becomes an active part of identity in certain circumstances. In Britain, Scottish and Welsh ethnic identities are more active and politicized than an English identity, but an English identity can become important in some contexts (such as sporting events or foreign travel).

Age and identity

Bradley describes age as 'the neglected dimension of inequality'. As a source of identity, age is important for individuals. Young people have legal constraints on what they are allowed to do; older people face ageism; and there are, of course, physiological differences between age groups which affect identity.

However, Bradley sees age as 'more problematic' as 'a basis of collective social identity'. Political parties are not usually organized to represent age

groups, and only a few pressure groups are concerned with age. Furthermore, 'Age as an issue is very low on the political agenda.' Thus, to Bradley, age is primarily part of individual identity and only rarely becomes part of an active or politicized identity. She identifies two main reasons for this:

- 1 Individuals move through different age groups and are aware that they will not stay young, middle-aged or old for ever. The temporary nature of their membership of an age group mitigates against the development of a stable, long-lasting identity.
- 2 Unlike other types of stratification, the most powerful group is in the middle. The most disadvantaged age groups, the young and the old, are likely to have little in common to form a basis for making common cause with one another.

However, there are some examples of age becoming a more active identity. Some aspects of youth culture express a sense of conflict with adults. Bradley quotes the classic song by the Who, 'My Generation':

*People try to put us down
Just because we get around.
The things they do look awful cold
Hope I die before I get old.*

Nevertheless, the more political aspects of youth culture are more likely to be related to other aspects of stratification than to age, particularly 'race'/ethnicity. (See, for example, the work of Paul Gilroy, pp. 260–2.) Political parties may have specific sections for the young (for example, Young Conservatives), but they are not wholly or mainly concerned with age-related issues.

Despite the limited importance of age as an active or politicized source of identity amongst the young, Bradley does note two examples of youth-related issues coming to the fore:

- 1 In 1960s America, Britain and other European countries, the radical student movement was partly based around age-related issues. This included demands for educational reform, sexual liberation and an end to what was seen as the bureaucratic and materialistic culture of the middle-aged.
- 2 In Britain in the 1990s something of a 'coalition of various youth interests (New Age travellers, ravers, environmental groups and "tribes")' got together to campaign against the Criminal Justice Bill. However, Bradley suggests that the unifying theme of this coalition – the 'right to party' – may not be sufficiently political to form the basis for a more lasting movement.

Amongst older people there have been some examples of political mobilization. In America a radical group called the Grey Panthers have campaigned for the

rights of the elderly. However, only a very small minority of older people get involved in political activities related to age. Their circumstances vary widely. They may be affluent or very poor, relatively young and vigorous or extremely elderly and very frail. In these circumstances it is hard for them to identify strongly with each other, let alone with the young (the other disadvantaged age group). Bradley does suggest that the old may become more political in the future, as the generation who were involved in the feminist and student movements of earlier decades reach retirement age.

Conclusion

Bradley concludes that in contemporary societies stratification systems and identities are becoming both **polarized** and **fragmented**. There is increasing polarization between the rich and the poor and between the young and the (increasingly long-lived) old. There is also some polarization between ethnic groups – with the re-emergence of nationalist and fascist groups determined to advocate racist policies – and between the affluent and poor elderly.

Inequality has not gone away. Sexism and racism continue to exist alongside ageism, class inequality and other sources of disadvantage. Gender and 'race'/ethnicity are somewhat in the ascendancy over class as sources of active and politicized identities. Age remains more important in terms of individual identities than collective ones. However, all are still important as sources of identity and there is fragmentation and division in each of them.

As a result, people in contemporary societies tend to have **fractured identities**. They lack a single identity that overarches all others. Nevertheless, people's identities are still essentially **social**. While there is an element of choice over identity this is not as great as postmodernists believe. Bradley says, 'Few of us can, as yet, choose to be English, male and middle class if we were born Indian, female and working class.'

To Bradley, the fracturing of identities is not new. There have always been divisions between and within different sources of identity, which have made it possible for individuals to have fractured identities. However, recent changes in society have led to increased fragmentation, and people have become more aware of the multiple sources of identity open to them.

Bradley concludes that both modernist and postmodern theories are necessary to understand identity and social change. She says:

A reworked version of modernist analysis, benefiting from the critical insights of postmodern and post-structuralist thought, offers the best hope for an adequate understanding of the double and contradictory nature of contemporary society, both fragmenting and polarizing. Such an approach must grasp the persisting nature of social hierarchies as well as exploring the interplay of relationships which gives rise to the fractured identities characteristic of post-capitalist societies.

Bradley, 1997, p. 214

the most important feature of society, and culture could only be explained and evaluated if class assumed a central role in the analysis.

More recently, however, class has rather fallen out of fashion as an explanation for sociological phenomena, or as a central source of identity for sociologists. Indeed, consumption may have become more important to some sociologists' sense of identity. The enormous choice of goods open to affluent middle-class professionals (such as university sociology lecturers) may have made more of an impression on them than any experience of oppression or class conflict.

It is not entirely surprising, then, that some sociologists have embraced postmodern ideas so wholeheartedly. For the advocates of postmodernism all culture is equally valid. There is no distinction

between high culture and mass culture. It is just as worthy to visit a shopping mall as it is to visit an opera house; just as valid to watch an episode of a soap opera as it is to watch a play by Shakespeare. All leisure activities and all cultures are worthwhile. The only criterion for evaluating them is whether they are enjoyable.

While such a viewpoint may be preferable to highly elitist views of writers such as Arnold, it is important that sociologists remember that not everybody has the same chance to shape their identity and sample cultures at will as they do. Inequalities continue to shape people's life chances, the cultures they develop, the art forms they prefer and the identities they establish. While no one identity may be better than any other, as Harriet Bradley points out, identities are not simply a matter of choice.

Culture, identity and values

It is not surprising that in studying culture sociologists have found it difficult to detach themselves from their own cultural values. Like all members of society, sociologists tend to be socialized into seeing certain cultures, particularly their own, as superior to others. A cultural critic such as Matthew Arnold was certainly influenced by his elite upbringing, his work in a public school and the tradition of literary criticism in which certain types of culture were seen as civilized while others were not. The prejudice in favour of elite culture continued in the twentieth century with the work of mass culture critics such as Macdonald.

Sociologists are not just influenced by their upbringing, though. As writers such as Bradley stress, your identity can develop throughout your life and is not fixed from childhood onwards. The identity you have shapes the way you see the world

and, in the case of sociologists, can influence the theories they develop.

Part of the process of developing an adult identity may involve becoming committed to a particular political ideology, which may in turn shape your prejudices about culture. Thus the Marxist sociologist Lucien Goldmann was impressed with the work of Pascal and Racine because their work was such a good expression of the world view of a particular class. The socialist ideas of Raymond Williams led him to take the everyday culture of the working class seriously, and therefore to believe that 'culture' was not just to be found in paintings, literature, music and the like.

Values are not just influenced by your upbringing and the political ideology you follow. They are also influenced by the era in which you live. For some earlier generations of sociologists class was seen as