

**PART I**

**CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY**

# CHAPTER 1

## STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

### SOCIAL THEORY

Sociologists today have an underdeveloped sense of humour. For all their talk of reflexivity, they themselves conspicuously lack any sense of self-awareness. This is unfortunate since it ensures that sociologists are incapable of appreciating the irony of their predicament. From its origins in the early nineteenth century, sociology made a distinctive intellectual contribution. Sociology sought to examine the general nature of social reality and to analyse the specific characteristics of emergent modern society. Auguste Comte, who invented the term 'sociology', emphasised the importance of this discovery of social reality. For him, the expansion of knowledge to this new and hitherto under-examined realm of human existence promised intellectual benefits on a par with physics or the other natural sciences. Although Comte's method was untenably positivistic, his neologism 'sociology' remains a useful reminder of the original purpose of discipline. Sociology seeks to demonstrate the decisive role which the social context plays in all human activity. In particular, sociology has illuminated the extraordinary potency of social relations between humans which are implicated in even the most apparently private individual acts. These all-pervading social relations cannot be reduced to psychological, biological or economic factors. Social relations constitute a fascinating reality which must be understood in its own terms. To use Durkheim's term, social relations are sacred; in their effervescent interaction, humans develop a powerful emotional attachment to each other which binds them together, inspiring them to particular forms of activity.

It [collective life] brings about a state of effervescence which changes the conditions of psychic activity. Vital energies are over-excited, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this

moment. A man does not recognise himself; he feels himself transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds him.  
(Durkheim 1976: 422)

In the course of social interaction, humans mutually transform each other to produce a completely new level of reality. This social reality is the world which humans inhabit. As Durkheim recognised, although this social reality is binding and indeed sacred, it depends upon the mere fact that humans recognise their relations to each other. Yet, although always dependent upon human understanding, social relations endow humans with powers which would be inconceivable if they were alone. The sacredness with which social relations are invested is unique to the intercourse of humans. These social relations which inspire the humans engaged in them should also excite the analytic interest of the sociologist. Certainly, Durkheim's work, whatever its limitations, effuses a sense of wonder at human social interaction. Weber was similarly impressed by the potency of human social relations and he described sociology as 'a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of *social* action' (Weber 1978: 4, emphasis added). Weber clarified what he meant by social action: 'action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course' (Weber 1978: 4). For Weber, human social action was distinctive because it was directed towards others. The mutual reaction of others was an intrinsic and dynamic element of human interaction. Moreover, these interactions were never independent of human consciousness. Humans had to come to a mutual understanding of what their interactions signified. They had to understand what their social relations involved and what they demanded of them. Human social relations were ultimately dependent on the shared meanings which the participants attach to their actions and relations. For Weber, these meanings transformed mere existence into something distinctively human: *life*. It was the task of the sociologists to analyse life in any historical period. Weber, like Durkheim, enthused about the infinite potential of human social relations; 'Life with its

irrational reality and its store of possible meanings is inexhaustible' (Weber 1949: 111). Although Marx concentrated on the alienation and degradation of human life, he too recognised the unique character of human social relations. Indeed, his disgust with capitalism was primarily motivated by a belief that it represented a negation of human social existence. For Marx, human existence was fundamentally social.

Therefore, even when the manifestation of his life does not take the form of a communal manifestation performed in the company of other men, it is still a manifestation and confirmation of social life. The individual and the species-life of man are not different.

(Marx 1990: 91)

Even when they are alone, humans cannot be understood in individual terms. The very individual characteristics which they displayed are a product of their social existence: their relations to others. Humans could never be considered separately from the social relations in which they existed; 'for only to social man is nature available as a bond with other men, as the basis of his own existence for others and theirs for him, and as the vital element in human reality' (Marx 1990: 90). Humans could not be identified in some primordial natural state apart from their social relations. Their specific humanity – their species being - lay precisely in their social existence; in their mutual interrelations with each other. For Marx, human existence was, by nature, social. Human history could only be comprehended by recognising this fertile inter-dependence of humans on each other which made each what they were. Durkheim, Weber and Marx were all inspired by the power of human social relations and dedicated themselves to the analysis of the unique and sacred properties of this reality. In this way, they represent the distinctive intellectual contribution of sociology; they tried to explain human action in terms of the social relations in which it arose. As Durkheim declared: 'Thus sociology appears destined to open a new way to the science of man' (Durkheim 1976: 447). As Durkheim, Marx and Weber recognised, sociology will be significant as long

as social relations between humans remain the primary focus of all research which is conducted in the name of this discipline.

Unfortunately, sociologists have increasingly forgotten what is distinctive about sociology. Today, sociologists seem incapable of recognising the special character of social reality. Sociology has become a misnomer for a discipline which is no longer interested in the social relations between humans. Instead, the dynamic power of social intercourse has been reduced to a deadening dualism. For sociologists now, society consists of two divisible elements; structure and agency. On the one hand, stand the cold institutions of the modern society and, on the other, the creative individual. This dualism is particularly prevalent in contemporary social theory, even though, it has been involved in philosophical debates which have focused precisely on the nature of social reality. Social theory emerged as a distinctive sub-discipline within sociology in the 1970s to become particularly prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. It sought to elaborate specifically upon the ontological and epistemological basis of sociology often independently of empirical analysis. Ironically, its search for ontological and epistemological grounding led it in almost every case away from the reality of social life. Contemporary social theory seems determined to ignore the fecund interplay of human social life, in favour of abstraction. In the last two decades, realism represented most prominently in Britain by Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer has attained an increasingly central position in social theory. According to realism, society consists of a dual or stratified ontology in which the individual reproduces an already existing social structure. Thus, Archer insists that 'it is fully justifiable to refer to structures (being irreducible to individuals or groups) as pre-existing them both' (Archer 1995: 75). Bhaskar has similarly stated that 'there is an ontological hiatus between society and people' (Bhaskar, 1979:46).

While society exists only in virtue of human agency, and human agency (or being) always presupposes (and expresses) some or other definite social form, they cannot be reduced or reconstructed from one another.

(Bhaskar 1986:124)

Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity and Archer's morphogenetic social theory propose a three-stage model of social reproduction in which pre-existing, independent and causally efficacious structure is reproduced or transformed by individual action. Anticipating realism, Peter Blau similarly argued for a dialectical social theory in which structure was reproduced and transformed by the individual in the course of social exchange: 'structural change, therefore, assumes a dialectical pattern' (Blau 1964: 338). Other social theorists, who have not always formally described themselves as realists, have similarly professed their support for this realist ontology of structure and agency.

The thesis I present is that an adequate account must come to terms with the fact that 'society' and its constituent elements are preconstituted and objective structures which constrain interaction. (Layder 1981:1)

Nicos Mouzelis has been even more forthright.

The subject-object distinction is another one that it is impossible to eliminate without paying too high a price... As with the micro-macro distinction, the divide between objectivist and subjectivist sociologies should neither be ignored (as in post-structuralism), nor transcended in a decorative, rhetorical manner (*a la* Bourdieu, Giddens or Elias).

(Mouzelis 1995: 156)

Similarly, Stones calls for a 'past-modernist realism whose acknowledgement of a rich, complex ontology is accompanied and matched by the adoption of a finely grained set of reflexive guidelines' (Stones 1996: 232). For Stones, social theorists must recognise that individuals are reflexive but that these individuals are themselves confronted by certain real structural conditions. They are ultimately reflexive about the objective conditions of their existence. He too has presumed a dualistic ontology of structure and agency.

Many other theorists are similarly committed to ontological dualism. In his encyclopaedic outline of sociology, Alexander has promoted a 'multi-dimensional' theory which takes account of the diverse aspects of society (Alexander 1983, 1984). Alexander calls his theory multi-dimensional because he advocates the consideration of social, cultural, political and economic factors. However, his criticisms of the Weber, Marx, Durkheim and Parsons reveal that he too is ultimately committed to ontological dualism (Alexander 1984: 230, 241). He rejects sociologists when they promote an explanatory account which emphasises only the social interactions between humans. Alexander believes that to focus merely on human social relations is analytically flawed since society manifestly consists of objective subsystems which interact with each other independently of the individual and, indeed, which impose upon the individual. Underlying Alexander's multidimensional theory is a commitment to ontological dualism. There are other extremely prominent figures, like Habermas, Foucault and Bourdieu, who are also implicitly committed to a similarly dualistic ontology in a large part of their writings. Thus, Habermas opposes the public, institutional system to the privatized and individual lifeworld (Habermas 1987b; 1991).

Other contemporary social theorists are committed to a similar dualism but employ the concept of structure (or equivalent) in a slightly different way. They envisage structure as a set of rules which are pattern individual action rather than as independent social institutions. In fact, the theorists who employ a conceptual rather than a 'real' definition of structure are closely related since the purpose of the conceptual definition of structure is to ensure the reproduction of institutional structure. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory is rightly prominent in contemporary social theory and it has also been employed in disciplines as diverse as geography and international relations. There is no doubting the academic importance of structuration theory but it is also a prime

example of the ontological dualism of contemporary social theory. The primary task of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory is to explain how the individual contributes to the reproduction of the social system. The central terms in structuration theory are system, structure and structuration. System refers to the social institutions of modern society (which realists call structure), structure (potentially confusingly) to certain rules which pattern individual action and structuration to the moment when individuals act in the light of these rules to reproduce the system. The curious 'stretching' of individual presence of which he writes refers to the way in which individual actions at one point in the system cohere with others elsewhere to reproduce the social structure as a whole. Structuration theory claims that individuals knowingly reproduce the social system, thereby, avoiding the 'derogation of the lay actor' (Giddens, 1988:71). For Giddens, the social system is reproduced only by means of knowledgeable individual agency. Nevertheless, the social system has its own autonomous status; it is independent of the individuals who reproduce it. Giddens notes that structuration theory is compatible with a realist epistemology and to emphasize the point, he insists that 'society is not the creation of individual subjects' (Giddens 1984: xl). Institutions have structural properties which are not reducible to individuals. Giddens' structuration theory operates around the divide between structure and agency trying to reconciling the two without falling into either objectivism or subjectivism. In this way, and against many of his critics, Giddens is explicitly committed to ontological dualism; he wants ultimately to preserve both structure and agency. Giddens is one of the most significance examples of dualism in contemporary social theory but he is far from being alone.<sup>1</sup> Although adopting very different political stances to Giddens, Foucault describes the way that modern discourses oppress the individual subject (Foucault 1974& 1995), while Bourdieu's habitus imposes upon the lone individual (Bourdieu 1984).<sup>2</sup> Contemporary social theory assumes a dualistic ontology. It focuses on the interrelation of structure

and agency.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Giddens' critics share his ontological presuppositions. Alex Callinicos has rejected Giddens on the grounds that he has putatively reduced the objective existence of structure to individual agency (Callinicos 1985: 162). Callinicos affirms structure but, at the same time, he defends individual agency: 'The explanatory autonomy of social structures is not inconsistent with the orthodox conception of agents' (Callinicos 1987: 38). For Callinicos, society consists of structure and agents and the purpose of social theory is to reconcile the two distinct elements. Despite his evident disdain for Giddens, in the end, Callinicos promotes a dualistic ontology which is consistent with structuration theory. John Thompson similarly advocates a dualistic ontology against the putative individualism of structuration theory: 'Structure and agency no longer appear to be the complementary terms of a duality but the antagonistic poles of a dualism, such that structural constraints may so limit the options of individuals that agency is effectively dissolved' (Thompson 1989: 73). Thompson insists that there is an objective dimension to society, independent of individual interpretation; 'I attempt to situate action within an overall context of social institutions and structural conditions' (Thompson 1981: 140-1). Like Callinicos, Thompson replicates the ontological dualism of structuration theory. For, these social theorists, society consists of structure and agency.

Indeed, ontological dualism only threatens to become more dominant and, at the moment, the divide between structure and agency is being emphasised ever more strongly. For some social theorists, structure has become the exclusive focus of attention, while, for others, individual agency has become analytically primary. In European sociology, Niklas Luhmann is becoming an increasingly important figure. His writings demonstrate an elaborate commitment to ontological dualism. However, in his work, the objective side of this dualism, the system, threatens to obliterate the

individual. Luhmann accepts that any social system must be made up in the first instance of individuals and their actions (Luhmann 1995: 215) but he rejects the argument that sociological analysis can limit itself merely to human social interaction (Luhmann 1997: 47).

Even the idea, initially attractive for sociologists, of an ‘intersubjective’ constitution of the world no longer helps; it is too self-evident and insufficiently theoretically productive. We employ the concept of a world as a concept for the *unity of the difference between system and environment*.

(Luhmann 1995: 208)

For Luhmann, society cannot be analysed by reference to human social relations.

Luhmann is concerned ultimately with the dialectic between the social system and the environment in which that system exists. As the system transforms, the environment in which it operates also transforms producing a spiralling process of change. The environment is not an objective given which is independent of the system but the kind of environment which a system faces is partly a product of the character of the system itself. The world which confronts a system depends at least partly on what a system is trying to achieve. There is a dialectical relationship between system and environment. This immanent dialectic of system and environment is the central point of Luhmann’s sociology and from it follows the other key arguments of Luhmann’s system theory.

For Luhmann, the basis of all interaction between the system is communication. The system receives information about the environment through communication and therefore, communication determines the way in which the system can evolve. For Luhmann, the evolution of the system is a critical focus which distinguishes his systems theory from Parsons’ structural-functionalism. While Parsons’ structural-functionalism prioritises systemic equilibrium through the interrelation of whole and parts, Luhmann emphasises differentiation (Luhmann 1995: 18). The system subdivides itself in the face of the environmental pressure created by its current relation to the environment. Yet,

this differentiation necessitates further dialectic transformation because each differentiated subsystem is confronted by a new environment; the environment of each new subsystem now consists of the other subsystems. Luhmann calls this immanent dialectic between systems their environments ‘autopoiesis’; the term refers to the fact that the system makes itself. As the system receives new information about the difference between itself and the environment, it resonates with this new information stimulating self transformation.

System resonance...is always in effect when the system is stimulated by the environment. The stimulation can be registered by the system if it possesses a corresponding capacity for information processing permitting it to infer the presence of an environment.

(Luhmann 1989: 14)

When resonance reaches a certain pitch, the (sub)system is forced to adapt to the new situation, usually involving functional differentiation (Luhmann 1989: 107-8).

According to Luhmann, the autopoietic process is structured by certain codes which underlie each (sub)system. Each subsystem is oriented around a binary code which mediates its relationship with its environment (Luhmann 1989: 36; 1995: 231-4; Luhmann 1997: 52). Thus, the legal system is structured by the code legal/illegal, the economic by the code possession/non-possession (Luhmann 1989: 36) and every single system or sub-system is ultimately constituted by these transcendental binary codes; ‘Codes are invariant for the system which identifies itself by them’ (Luhmann 1997: 52). Crucially, these codes determine the kinds of communication any system can receive or send and therefore the kind of autopoietic adaptations which can occur. These codes also structure the individuals operating in that system. The codes precede social action in any particular system. For Luhmann, the binary codes allow the system to ‘interpenetrate’ the human subject. Luhmann uses the word ‘interpenetrate’ because he sees the social system and the human subject as a relationship between two systems and

their respective environments. Both consequently influence or interpenetrate each other. However, although Luhmann might argue that the individual interpenetrates the social system, the latter is primary. The social system has determination over the individual whom it socialises by means of the imposition of these binary norms. Luhmann is explicit that interpenetration is the optimum concept because it ‘avoids reference to the nature of human beings, recourse to the (supposedly foundational) subjectivity of consciousness, or formulating the problem as ‘intersubjectivity’ (which presupposes subjects)’ (Luhmann 1995: 216). Individuals are socialised into the roles required by the social system by the internalisation of certain binary codes. In modern societies with particular kinds of systems these codes produce a specific kind of person; ‘binary schematisms are the precondition for the emergence of a figure that in modern philosophy has gone by the name of the subject’ (Luhmann 1995: 233). Luhmann usefully summarises his discussion of the relationship between the individual and the system: ‘All socialisation occurs as social interpenetration; all social interpenetration, as communication’ (Luhmann 1995: 243). The steering of any system is not consequently the result of conscious social interaction but rather the automatic, self-transforming responses of the system to the communication it receives. In Luhmann’s sociology, human social interaction is effaced in favour of a self-equilibrating and self-transforming system. Autopoiesis is not reducible to the social relations between humans nor does it ultimately depend upon human consciousness. Luhmann’s work promotes a stern form of ontological dualism in which the individual is subordinated to the objective system. Human social relations, by contrast, are a subsidiary element in his world.<sup>4</sup>

Luhmann’s work emphasises the objective side of ontological dualism. In his work, structure or the system, as he calls, it is dominant. Other contemporary social theorists

in contrast to Luhmann, have increasingly focussed on the individual agent; they have gone over to the other side of structure and agency dualism. The later writings of Anthony Giddens are a prime example here. From 1987, the concerns and style of Giddens' writing changed from dense theoretical discussions, to breezier discussions of the defining characteristics of late modernity, which Alexander has satirically called 'Giddens lite' (Alexander 1996: 135). For Giddens, modernity involves the dis-embedding of relations from local settings and their stretching across time and space. In the light of new methods of communication and new expert systems, the face-to-face relations of pre-modern societies have been replaced by long-distance relations which now straddle the globe. Giddens has increasingly described late modern society as post-traditional (Giddens 1995b: 192). In post-traditional society, the individual is no longer committed to one tradition nor restricted to ascribed social relations. Since it is no longer obvious what individuals should do or be, individuals must self-consciously consider their options and make choices about what they should do. Self-identity must be reflexively created by the individual: 'The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of a dialectical interplay between local and global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among the diversity of options' (1995b: 5). No longer constrained by tradition, individuals have to decide upon what kind of persons they will be. 'The self is seen as a reflexive project, for which individuals are responsible. We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves' (Giddens 1995b: 75). The individual's autonomy becomes clearest when Giddens discusses the emergence of a new form of sexuality. According to Giddens, the sexuality of post-traditional society is distinguishable from former societies by the fact that sexual practices have become divorced from the biological function of reproduction (Giddens 1993: 34). With the development of 'plastic sexuality', Giddens envisages the development of 'pure relations' between individuals. In these pure relations of

friendship or ‘confluent love’ (Giddens 1993: 61-2), individuals are no longer bound to each other by social and moral obligations but only by their personal needs. ‘Giving certain conditions, the pure relationship can provide a facilitating social environment for the reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens 1993: 139). Once individuals have established certain rules of conduct, they can utilise their sexuality plastically in mutually pleasurable ways. Although Giddens emphasises the plasticity of sexuality, in fact, given the new reflexivity of the individual, the individual’s entire selfhood has become plastic for Giddens. For him, new technological developments have broken the shackles of tradition and liberated individuals into a world of choice in which they can freely decide upon the ways in which they can lead their lives and interact with others. Giddens ignores the wider social context in which the new individual is possible and emphasises instead the personal powers of this putatively autonomous being.

Although for the most part Giddens disconnects the post-traditional individual from the system, at certain points in his later writing, Giddens recognises that there is a link between this individual and the wider social structure. At this point, the ontological dualism of structuration theory reappears as the isolated post-traditional individual reproduces the late modern social system: ‘the overriding stress of the book [*Modernity and Self-Identity*] is upon the emergence of new mechanisms of self-identity which are shaped by – yet also shape – the institutions of modernity’ (Giddens 1995b: 2). For Giddens, the post-traditional individual adopts practices which reproduce the very systems that promote the individual in the first place. The liberated individual now reproduces a system which thrives on the emancipation of the plastic individual. Giddens’ individual is freer than Luhmann’s but both theorists operate around the two poles of structure and agent. Luhmann emphasises the social structure, Giddens’ agency but their sociologies are contoured by these two concepts.

Giddens is a particularly prominent example of individualistically oriented dualism but there are many other examples of creeping individualising in contemporary sociology.<sup>5</sup> According to Scott Lash and John Urry one of the distinctive feature of the present era is the increasing significance of the individual; ‘Structural change in the economy forces the individual to be freed from the structural rigidity of the Fordist labour process’ (Lash and Urry 1994: 5). For Lash and Urry, the individual, freed from structural constraint, has more agency and autonomy in post-Fordist society.

This accelerating individualization process is a process in which agency is set free from structure, a process in which, further, it is a structural change itself in modernization that so to speak forces agency to take on powers that heretofore lay in the social structures themselves.

(Lash and Urry 1994: 5)

Lash and Urry do not entirely ignore structural factors as their monographs on political economy reveal (1987; 1994) but the significance of structure has receded. Individuals have increasing autonomy to choose their own social existence. Stuart Hall has similarly argued for the emancipation of the individual in contemporary society. In promoting his ‘new times’ project, Stuart Hall disparages his former structuralism; ‘For a long time, being a socialist was synonymous with the ability to translate everything into the language of “structures”’ (Hall 1990: 120). In place of structure, sociologists should now focus on their attention on the individual agent who now enjoys more powers than was previously the case: ‘One boundary which ‘new times’ has certainly displaced is that between the objective and subjective dimensions of change. This is the so-called ‘revolution of the subject’ aspect’ (Hall 1990: 119). His current promotion of the individual is particularly striking since his early work on youth culture and the media, employed a structuralist Gramscian approach which subordinated the individual to wider historical and institutional conditions (e.g. Hall *et al.* 1978; Hall and Jefferson 1976). Hall has oscillated precisely between the twin ontological poles of contemporary

social theory, once emphasising structure, now the agent. Hall, Lash and Urry are important examples of individualising in sociology. They promote a positive vision of contemporary society in which the individual is increasingly freed from structure. These sociologists are still dualistic but they, like Giddens, now emphasis the individualistic side of that polarity. Other commentators have concurred with their ontology but disputed their optimistic account of contemporary social reality. Jean Baudrillard is prominent here. He has argued that post-Fordist society constitutes a new departure in the history of humanity. The television, in particular, has transformed social reality. It has replaced normal social interaction with powerful images which have become more real than reality itself. These 'hyperreal' images now dominatesociety, imposing themselves upon lone individuals absolutely: 'For information and the media are not a scene, a prospective space, or something that's performed, but a screen without depth, a tape perforated with messages and signals to which corresponds areceiver's own perforated reading' (Baudrillard 1990b: 65; see also 1990a; 1994). Individuals no longer have any external referent beyond these images and consequently know of no other reality. They are completely determined by media images to which their view of the world inexorably corresponds like a roll of music on a pianola. The individual stands alone before these images.<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard presents a pessimistic account of structure and agency in contemporary society. Indeed, he asserts that individual agency has been obliterated by the development of new media structures. Yet, he shares ontological convictions with Giddens, Lash, Urry and Hall. For him, modern society is understood in terms of structure and agency.<sup>7</sup>

In contemporary social theory, the dualistic ontology of structure and agency is hegemonic. Social reality has been reduced to the agent, on the one hand, and structure, on the other. There is ultimately no social context

in contemporary society, just structure and agency. Certainly, there is a growing divide between contemporary theorists. Some, like Luhmann, adopt an almost exclusively objectivist view, focussing only on structure, while others, like Giddens, emphasise the new powers of the agent. Yet, in both cases, the social relations between human beings have become irrelevant. The specifically social reality which makes human existence what it is distinctively is, has been forgotten. This is not the first time this has happened in sociology. In the 1930s, Karl Mannheim proposed a sociology of knowledge as a form of critical theory (Mannheim 1976). For Mannheim, social beliefs could be broadly divided into two forms. 'Ideology' referred to the legitimating beliefs of dominant groups, 'utopia' to the subversive beliefs of subordinate and resistant groups. Mannheim suggested that true intellectuals could attain a dis-interested position through recognising the structural origins of the beliefs of subordinate and dominant groups. Intellectuals effectively floated free from structural imperatives. In his well-known criticisms of Mannheim, Karl Popper complained that Mannheim's so-called sociology of knowledge was a misnomer. Mannheim ignored the actual social processes by which groups produced knowledge. The social interaction by means of which humans mutually developed their understandings was absent from his analysis. Instead, he focussed merely on the way in which isolated individuals adopted pre-existing ideologies consistent with their position in society. There was no social process here, mere inculcation.

The sociology of knowledge is not only self-destructive, not only a rather gratifying object of socio-analysis, it also shows an astounding failure to understand precisely its main subject, the *social aspects of knowledge*... Scientific objectivity can be described as the inter-subjectivity of scientific method. But this social aspect of science is almost entirely neglected by those who call themselves sociologists of knowledge.

(Popper 1976: 216-7)

Contemporary social theory is marked by the same fault. Human social relations have been effaced by a dualistic picture in which structure confronts the individual. The

infinite richness of shared human life is reduced to a mechanical model; structure imposes upon the agent, the agent reproduces the structure. Yet, society is nothing but human social relations. Society consists precisely of the complex web of social relations between people. These social relations are the social reality. Yet, contemporary social theory ignores these social relations. It ironically ignores the very phenomenon which validates the discipline to which they have nominally committed themselves. It is extremely unfortunate that contemporary social theory has descended into ontological dualism. This dualism is philosophically untenable and vitiates empirical research. It has mis-directed sociology away from the detailed analysis of human social relations into abstract theorising, of the kind which Luhmann demonstrates, or celebratory individualism, evinced in the later work of Giddens. Although comprehensively fallacious, the current adherence of the discipline to this ontology is perhaps explicable. Such an explanation may begin to provide the first steps towards a new theoretical consensus in sociology today.

### **THE RISE OF THE STATE**

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, Ferdinand and Isabella in Castile, the Tudors in England and the Valois in France reformed the medieval monarchies to which they succeeded by centralising existing bureaucratic procedures. The innovations of the new royal houses has been widely recognised as the origins of the modern state (Anderson 1974; Tilly 1975; Van Creveld 1999; Corrigan and Sayer 1991; Williams 1970; Kennedy 1999). In each case, old dynastic medieval monarchies began to administer their territories with increasing directness from the throne itself. Certainly, the sixteenth century states were diffuse in comparison with what they would become in the twentieth century but, from the beginning of sixteenth century, the rise of a new kind of

political entity was evident over much of Europe. Increasingly, this nascent state did not simply claim theoretical sovereignty over its domain, as medieval monarchs had sometimes done. It actually administered its sovereign territory with its own representatives. It is true until the nineteenth century, monarchs often accepted the local appropriation of office by tax-farmers so long as these tax-farmers ensured the authority of the state there. Yet, slowly, the state began to emerge as a unified sovereign entity over increasingly closely administered territories. As the state developed, it broke down old medieval corporations, estates, guilds and civic councils so that individuals emerged from formerly solidary social relations. These increasingly isolated individuals were confronted by a powerful new political entity which towered over each of them; a Leviathan, which coiled itself about the individuals over whom it ruled. From the sixteenth century, accelerating after the second half of the seventeenth, European society was characterised by a twin development; the emergence of a unified state and the concomitant atomisation of individuals, sundered from medieval social solidarities.

Norbert Elias has captured this double development of state and individual by tracing the emergence of manners and etiquette in European court society from the high middle ages. For most of the middle ages, European culture was dominated by the barbaric culture of a warrior nobility. Eating, drinking and various bodily motions were natural functions subject, according to Elias, to no social control. Food was eaten with the hands, spitting at will was normal and nostrils were evacuated without any attempt to conceal mucus. Individuals performed basic biological functions without the mediation of cultural constraint.<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of the middle ages, especially the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a concern with bodily conduct and control emerged in the courts around Europe. Here, uncontrolled body movements – spitting, sneezing, farting – were deemed increasingly inappropriate. According to Elias, the emergent bourgeoisie

and professional middle class (employed especially in the nascent state bureaucracies) introduced new forms of conduct into court society (Elias 1978: 22, 26-29). At the same time as manners developed, European states began to become more centralised. Above all, monarchs began to monopolise violence (Keegan 1994; Howard 2000; Weber 1978). Monarchs began to raise their own armies, while feuding which had characterised the middle ages was restricted. The reformation of manners from the late fifteenth century constituted an important element in this process of pacification. In controlling and limiting the individual and especially the formerly volatile nobility, manners were an element in the historical development of the state. Manner assisted in centralising violence in the hands of the sovereign, by reforming the everyday conduct of subjects.

Here the individual is largely protected from sudden attack, the irruption of physical violence into his life. But at the same time he is himself forced to suppress in himself any passionate impulse urging him to attack another physically....The transformation of the nobility from a class of knights into a class of courtiers is an example of this.

(Elias 1982: 236)

Elias concludes.

Physical violence is confined to the barracks; and from this store-house it breaks out only in extreme cases, in times of war or social upheaval, into individual life. As the monopoly of certain specialist groups it is normally excluded from the life of others.

(Elias 1982: 238)

Through his analysis of manners, Elias illuminates the way that the emergence of the self-disciplined and autonomous individual parallels the development of the modern state; they are alternative sides of the same historic movement.<sup>9</sup> In early modern Europe, a distinctive political ontology emerged of individual and state.

This political ontology of isolated individuals under an overarching state was recognised by European writers as this new regime began to emerge. One of the earliest examples of this is provided by Alexis De Tocqueville's discussion of the new kind of

society forged by the French Revolution. In his analysis of the Revolution, De Tocqueville argued that the turmoil that followed 1789 did not undermine the political order in France so much as rationalise it. The French Revolution was promoted most strongly by the emergent urban, industrial and professional bourgeoisie, particularly those employed in the growing bureaucratic machinery of the state. Although there were moments of near anarchy for short periods, the overwhelming effect of the Revolution was to demote a superfluous aristocracy, engaged merely in trivial struggles for honour and prestige at the court in Versailles. The Revolution assaulted this anachronistic social group but did not reverse the trajectory of French political development; on the contrary, it accelerated the centralisation of the state and for the first time unified a national population beneath it (De Tocqueville 1955). Significantly, De Tocqueville noted that the corollary of the state's appearance was the increasing isolation of individuals.

That word 'individualism', which we have coined for our own requirements, was unknown to our ancestors, for the good reason that in their days every individual necessarily belonged to a group and no one could regard himself as an isolated unit.

(De Tocqueville 1955: 96)

For De Tocqueville, European modernity involved a novel political situation in which the individual was now freed from former social solidarities but this was not a moment of untroubled liberation. On the contrary, in this individualism, De Tocqueville saw the potential for tyranny since 'all were quite ready to sink their differences and to be integrated into a homogenous whole, provided no one was given a privileged position and rose above the common level' (De Tocqueville 1995: 96). The new individualism demanded equality in place of the graded hierarchy of the medieval Estates system but this equality threatened to create equal oppression of all under the monolithic state. In this political order, the individual now isolated from various social groups was defenceless against the state. As Max Beloff describes:

The demand for individual liberty played in the long run, as we have seen, straight into the hands of the State, since the State was the instrument through which the older collective caste or group liberties were destroyed.

(Beloff 1954: 53)

De Tocqueville's writing was an early statement of the dualistic political ontology of modern Europe. He presciently recognised the double historical movement which brought both the individual and the state to the fore and the political problems which this new ontology posed. Following De Tocqueville's diagnosis of the political ontology of modernity, Durkheim similarly emphasised the distinctive individualism of European society. Like De Tocqueville he was similarly pessimistic about the social implications of this dual development; 'While the state becomes inflated and hypertrophied in order to obtain a firm enough grip upon individuals, but without succeeding, the latter without mutual relationship tumble over one another like so many liquid molecules' (Durkheim 1952: 389). Echoing De Tocqueville, Durkheim saw this dual development of state and individual as socially and politically dangerous, threatening not only political oppression but personal anomie as well. In modern European society, human social relations had been replaced by the cold dualism of individual and state.<sup>10</sup>

The dualistic ontology of individual and state described by Elias, De Tocqueville and Durkheim is extremely attractive to the social scientist. It is analytically elegant and it does accord with certain aspects of the modern experience. The individual experience of being confronted by a distant institution is a familiar one in modern societies. The dualistic political ontology has some manifest empirical grounding. Yet, this ontology in no way represents an accurate picture of the modern social reality. It focuses only on one experience of this reality, raising it to an axiomatic level. Ultimately, sociologists have taken this beguiling image of individual and state and transformed it into a sociological ontology. Society rather than the state now confronts the individual. In contemporary social theory, this dichotomy is expressed in distinctive terms; the

opposition of society and the individual is described as structure and agency. This dualism dominates the discipline as society is consistently comprehended in terms of a relationship between structural realities and individual agency. Given the historic importance of the double development of the state and individual in western history, it is understandable why sociologists should have converted this political ontology into sociological one. All academic disciplines are inevitably influenced by the historic circumstances in which they arise. However, although the prevalence of the dualistic ontology is historically understandable, this does mean that such a dualism is defensible. It is not. This ontology is sociologically false. Despite the appeal of the dualistic ontology, the institutional reality of modern society can be adequately explained by reference to social relations alone. Society does not consist of structure and agency but of the social relations between human beings. Life is not the struggle of the individual against structure, nor the reproduction of the structure by the agent but an eternal round of interactions through which social relations between humans are made, transformed and destroyed. Even the vast and apparently faceless institutions of modern society are ultimately reducible to the social relations between humans. In every case, these institutions involve groups of humans in social relations co-ordinated in special ways and with access to certain resources. In this way, these social groups have the extraordinary powers which are so recognisable to individuals in modern society. The reality which individuals confront is human; it is others, even when these others are gathered into very large and powerful groups. In every instance, society consists of human social relations which are the basis of even the most powerful associations. Just as structure has been consistently mis-perceived so has the individual in modern been mis-understood. It is an error to conceive of the modern individual as genuinely autonomous. The modern individual may enjoy greater personal rights than a medieval subject; it is also possible that in certain cases, individuals have greater freedom to

move between groups. However, The modern individual is a product of new kinds of social relations which emerged in the modern period. Modern society is not characterised by individualism, although as Durkheim famously argued the Cult of the Individual is certainly important, but by the existence of new social networks. Together, these networks make up the institutions which supposedly confront the individual. Similarly, the plastic or postmodern individual is a product of new kinds of social relations. In these relations, a new kind of individual may be emerging; in these social relations, humans may mutually understand themselves and others in different ways. Consequently, the individual may be able to do things which are impossible in previous historical eras. Yet, it is wrong to claim that the individual is more autonomous now. On the contrary, the putative autonomy of the individual is a result of the new social relations in which humans are embedded and which relations allow them certain forms of agency. The trouble is that sociologists have been bewitched by the dualistic image of state and individual. They have exaggerated one kind of experience in modern society – an individual standing before faceless state bureaucracies - and raised it to the level of a sociological axiom. They have tried to understand society in terms of structure and agency because modern society seems to consist of a dualism between social institutions and the individual. They have failed to recognise the reality of modern society which consists of complex webs of social relations between humans. Instead, social theorists prefer to operate with a conveniently simplified image of social reality; the restless cascade of social relations is reduced to the mechanical opposition of structure and agency.

## **BEYOND DUALISM**

Ontological dualism is currently hegemonic in social theory. Current debates in social theory presuppose an ontology of structure and agency but even in more empirical areas of research, as the works of Lash, Urry and Hall demonstrate, the concepts of structure and agency predominate. Against this dualism, a social ontology must be promoted.

This social ontology does not divide society into structure and agent. It focuses only on social relations between humans. Humans are never isolated, nor are they confronted by an objective structure. Humans exist in social relations with other humans. The focus of sociology has to be these social relations. This social ontology in no way denies the institutional reality of modern society. It recognises the extraordinary powers of modern states and multinational corporations but explains these powers in terms of the social networks of which these entities consist. It does not unthinkingly reify these institutions into objective structures but seeks through detailed empirical analysis to show how certain social groups are able to mobilise themselves in ways which have the most striking social effects. The social ontology understands the reality of institutions by reference to the actuality of social relations which persist there. A sociology based on a social ontology recognises the potency of human social relations but it avoids the reification of ontological dualism. Society is no less real simply because it is believed to consist of social relations. Social theory is currently entranced by a dualism but the reality of social life stands before its eyes.

It is perhaps no accident that this re-orientation of sociology away from its dualist ontology of society and the individual, towards a social ontology of interacting humans should appear as necessary now. The historic conditions which made the dual ontology seem so self-evident are unravelling. In particular, the state is undergoing rapid

transformation. The political ontology of individual and state is no longer necessarily a fundamental feature of modernity and, consequently, historical conditions allow the dualistic ontology of society and individual to be re-considered. The declining relevance of the individual-state metaphor has allowed social theorists to understand social life in alternative ways.

Current historical transformations do more than merely allow sociologists to recognise the analytical importance of human social relations, however. It is incumbent upon the sociologist to provide an account of these changes. European society is currently undergoing transformations on a scale of a historic significance with the industrial and political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The contours of European state society which finally crystallised towards the end of the nineteenth century are being radically re-configured. Global economic forces are undermining the autonomy of nation states, fissuring formerly stable national unities from above and below. Waves of mass cross-border immigration are transforming national cultures and demographics. New solidarities and new forms of politics are emerging which are likely to be as historically significant as those changes which characterised the rise of the European state system. The scale of contemporary transformations do not, therefore, merely liberate sociology, allowing it to re-imagine itself, but these transformations demand a radical re-invention of the discipline. Sociology arose precisely in response to the disorientating transformations which Europeans experienced in the early part of the nineteenth century. It will retain its relevance only if it continues to provide compelling interpretations of contemporary social change. It is most likely to be able to provide such interpretations insofar as sociology adopts a social ontology. A social ontology insists that society consists only of social relations: humans interacting with each other on the basis of shared meanings. Sociology should focus precisely on how these social

relations come into being and are transformed by the humans engaged in them. They are the fascinating subject matter of this discipline with their own distinctive properties. Sociology must overcome the dual ontology which is dominant today and turn once again to the reality of human existence: to social relations. In the first instance, this can be achieved only by mounting a critique of contemporary social theory. The manifest and decisive errors of social theory must be demonstrated. The ontology of structure and agency must be refuted. Yet, this critique must also involve a positive element. It must simultaneously illuminate those moments when social theorists recognise the importance of human social relations and renege upon their own formal commitment to the abstractions of ontological dualism.