

different aspects of society. Often, debates between and criticisms of these different perspectives help us to understand social issues much more clearly.

What follows is an introduction to some of these sociological perspectives. These perspectives are often best understood by looking at particular areas, and this book will explore them further in various chapters, building on and illustrating what is said below.

Sociological perspectives centre on the themes of how much freedom or control the individual has to influence society. To what extent is the individual's identity moulded by social forces outside her or his control? How much control does the individual have over these social forces, and how free are individuals to form their own identities?

There are two main approaches here:

- the sociology of system, often referred to as **structuralism**.
- the sociology of action – social action or interpretivist theories.

STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism is concerned with the overall structure of society, and the way social institutions, like the family, the education system, the media and work, act as a constraint on, or limit and control, individual behaviour. Structuralist approaches have the following features:

- The behaviour of individual human beings, the way they act (their social action) and the formation of their identities are seen as being a result of social forces which are external to the individual – the individual is moulded, shaped and constrained by society through socialization, positive and negative sanctions, and material resources like income and jobs. For example, institutions like the family, the education system, the media, the law and the workplace mould us into our identities. According to the structuralist approach, the individual is like a puppet, whose strings are pulled by society. We might see people almost like jelly, poured into a 'social mould' to set.
- The main purpose of sociology is to study the overall structure of society, the social institutions which make up this structure, and the relationships between these social institutions (or the various parts of society) such as the links between the workplace and the economy, the economy and the political system, the family and the education system, and so on. The focus of sociology is on the study of social institutions and the social structure as a whole, not on the individual. This is sometimes referred to as a **macro approach**.

Structuralism is illustrated in the cartoon on the right.

Activity

- 1 How much is our behaviour moulded by social forces beyond our control? Try to think of all the factors which have contributed to the way you are now, and which prevent you from behaving in any way you like. You might consider factors like the influences of your parents and family background, the media, experiences at school, your friendship groups, income and so on.
- 2 Imagine you were creating an ideal society from scratch. Plan how you would organize it, with particular reference to the following issues:
 - the care and socialization of children.
 - the passing on of society's knowledge and skills from one generation to the next.
 - the production of food and other goods necessary for survival.
 - how you would allocate food and other goods to members of society.
 - the establishment and enforcement of rules of behaviour.
 - how you would deal with people who didn't conform to social rules.
 - how you would coordinate things and resolve disputes between members of society.
- 3 Consider how your ideal society is similar to, or different from, the organization of contemporary Britain. How would you explain these differences?



Structural approaches see individuals formed by the wider social forces making up the social structure of society

Functionalism is a sociological perspective which sees society as made up of parts which work together to maintain society as an integrated whole.

Functional prerequisites are the basic needs that must be met if society is to survive.

Structuralism is a perspective which is concerned with the overall structure of society, and sees individual behaviour moulded by social institutions like the family, the education system, the mass media and work.

A **macro approach** focuses on the large-scale structure of society as a whole, rather than on individuals.

Value consensus is a general agreement around the main values and norms of any society.

Marxism is a structural theory of society which sees society divided by conflict between two main opposing social classes, due to private ownership of the means of production.

The **means of production** are the key resources necessary for producing society's goods

The **relations of production** are the forms of relationship between those people involved in production, such as cooperation or private ownership and control.

Ideology is a set of ideas, values and beliefs that represents the outlook, and justifies the interests, of a social group.

There are two main varieties of structuralism: functionalism (consensus structuralism) and Marxism (conflict structuralism).

Functionalism (consensus structuralism)

Functionalism is most closely associated with the work of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and the American Talcott Parsons (1902–79), who are referred to in various parts of this book. Functionalism sees society built up and working like the human body, made up of interrelated parts which function for, or contribute to, the maintenance of society as a whole. For example, in order to understand the importance of the heart, lungs and brain in the human body, we need to understand what function or purpose each carries out and how they work together in providing and maintaining the basic needs of human life. Similarly, functionalists argue that any society has certain **functional prerequisites** (certain basic needs or requirements) that must be met if society is to survive. These include the production of food, the care of the young and the socialization of new generations into the culture of society. Social institutions like the family or education exist to meet these basic needs, in the same way as we have to have a heart and lungs to refresh our blood and pump it around our bodies.

Just as the various parts of the human body function in relation to one another and contribute to the maintenance of the body as a whole, so, according to functionalist sociology, social institutions meet functional prerequisites, maintaining the social system and order and stability in society. In this view, social institutions like the family, education and work are connected and function in relation to one another for the benefit of society as a whole. Stability in society is based on socialization into norms and values on which most people agree. These shared norms and values are known as a **value consensus**. It is this value consensus which functionalists believe maintains what they see as a peaceful, harmonious society without much conflict between people and groups.

Activity

Try to think of all the connections or links you can between the following institutions – for example, how what happens in the family may influence what happens at school and educational achievement:

- the family and the education system
- the family and the workplace
- education and the workplace

Marxism (conflict structuralism)

The term **Marxism** comes from the work of Karl Marx, who lived from 1818 to 1883.

Base and superstructure Marx believed that the economy was the driving force in society, and it was this that determined (or influenced) the nature of social institutions, and people's values and beliefs. Marxism sees the structure of society divided into two main parts, illustrated in figure 1.2.

- 1 The economic base, or **infrastructure**, which underpins and determines everything else in society; this consists of:
 - the **means of production**, like the land, factories, raw materials, technology and labour necessary to produce society's goods.
 - the **relations of production**: the relations, such as shared ownership or private ownership, between those involved in production; who controls production; and the relationship between owners and non-owners, e.g. whether people are forced to work, like slaves, or paid for their work.
- 2 The **superstructure**, which includes society's social institutions, such as the family, education, the media, religion and the political system, and beliefs and values (**ideology**), which Marx saw as primarily determined (or influenced) by the economic system.

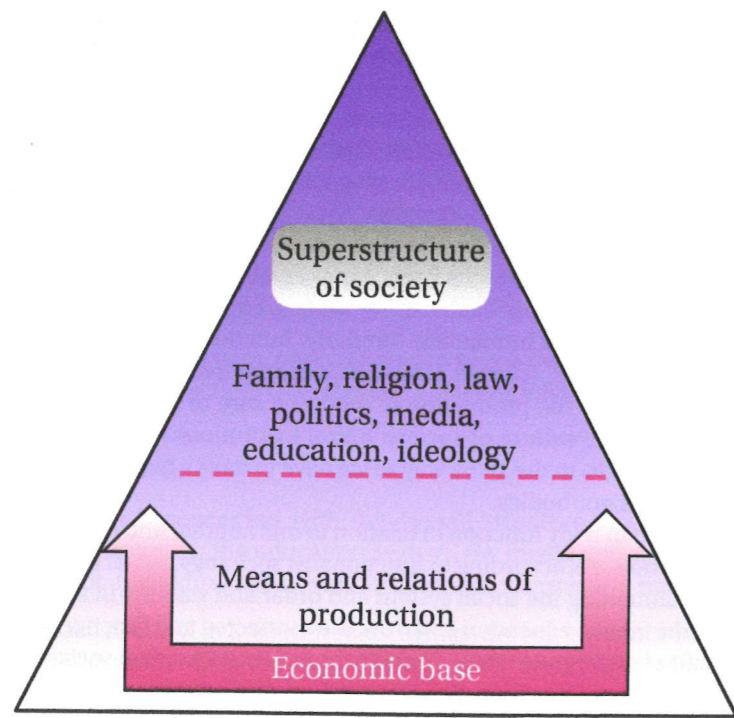


Figure 1.2 The base and superstructure in Marxist theory

Surplus value and exploitation In a capitalist society, the means of production are privately owned, and most people depend on the owners for employment. Marx argued that workers produce more than is needed for employers to pay them their wages – this ‘extra’ produced by workers is what Marx called **surplus value**, and provides profit for the employer. For example, in a burger chain, it is the workers who make, cook, package and serve the burgers, but only half the burgers they sell are necessary to cover production costs and pay their wages. The rest of the sales provide profit for the owners of the burger chain. This means that the workers who produce the burgers do not get the full value of their work, and they are therefore being exploited.

Activity

Do you think those who produce the wealth should get the full share of what they produce? Do you think most goods today are produced because people need them, or because they can be persuaded to buy them by advertising? See what other people think about this.

Capitalists and workers Marx argued that there were two basic social classes in capitalist industrial society: a small wealthy and powerful class of owners of the means of production (which he called the **bourgeoisie** or **capitalists** – the owning class) and a much larger, poorer class of non-owners (which he called the **proletariat** or working class). The proletariat, because they owned no means of production of their own, had no means of living other than to sell their labour, or **labour power** as Marx called it, to the bourgeoisie in exchange for a wage or salary. The capitalists exploited the working class by making profits out of them by keeping wages as low as possible instead of giving the workers the full payment for the goods they’d produced.

Class conflict Marx asserted that this exploitation created major differences in interest between the two classes, and this created conflict. For example, the workers’ interests lay in higher wages to achieve a better lifestyle, but these would be at the expense of the bosses’ profits. The bosses wanted higher profits to expand their businesses and wealth, but this could only be achieved by keeping wages as low as possible and/or by making the workers produce more by working harder.

Surplus value is the extra value added by workers to the products they produce, after allowing for the payment of the wages, and which goes to the employer in the form of profit.

The **bourgeoisie** (or **capitalists**) is the class of owners of the means of production in industrial societies, whose primary purpose is to make profits.

The **proletariat** is the social class of workers who have to work for wages as they do not own the means of production.

Labour power refers to people’s capacity to work. People sell their labour power to the employer in return for a wage, and the employer buys only their labour power, and not the whole person.

Class conflict is the conflict that arises between different social classes. It is generally used to describe the conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in Marxist views of society.

The **ruling class** is the social class of owners of the means of production, whose control over the economy gives them power over all aspects of society, enabling them to rule over society.

The **dominant ideology** (or **ruling class ideology**) is the set of ideas and beliefs of the most powerful groups in society, which influences the ideas of the rest of society. **False consciousness** is a failure by members of a social class to recognize their real interests.

Class consciousness is an awareness in members of a social class of their real interests. **Communism** refers to an equal society, without social classes or class conflict, in which the means of production are the common property of all.

The interests of these two classes are therefore totally opposed, and this generates conflict between the two social classes (**class conflict**). Marx believed this class conflict would affect all areas of life.

The ruling class Marx argued that the owning class was also a **ruling class**. For example, because they owned the means of production, the bourgeoisie could decide where factories should be located, and whether they should be opened or closed down, and they could control the workforce through hiring or firing. Democratically elected governments could not afford to ignore this power of the bourgeoisie, otherwise they might face rising unemployment or other social problems if the bourgeoisie decided not to invest its money.

Dominant ideology Marx believed the ruling or dominant ideas in any society, what he called the **dominant ideology**, were those of the owning class (hence it is sometimes also called **ruling class ideology**) and the major institutions in society reflected those ideas.

For example, the law protected the interests of the owning class more than it did those of the workers; religion acted as the ‘opium of the people’, persuading the working class to accept their position as just and natural (rather than rebelling against it), by ‘drugging’ them and inducing hallucinations of future rewards in heaven for putting up with their present suffering; the bourgeoisie’s ownership of the media meant only their ideas were put forward. In this way, the workers were almost brainwashed into accepting their position. They failed to recognize they were being exploited and therefore did not rebel against the bourgeoisie. Marx called this lack of awareness by the working class of their own interests **false consciousness**.

Revolution and communism However, Marx thought that one day the circumstances would arise in which the workers did become aware of their exploitation. They would develop **class consciousness** (an awareness of their real interests and their exploitation) and would join together to act against the bourgeoisie through strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protest. This would eventually lead to a revolution against and overthrow of the bourgeoisie. The means of production would then be put in the hands of the state and run in the interests of everyone, not just of the bourgeoisie. Marx foresaw this leading to a new form of society which he called **communism**. This new communist society would be an equal society, in which the means of production would be the common property of all, and would be without exploitation, without classes and without class conflict.

Marx therefore saw society based on the exploitation of one large class by a small group of owners, creating social classes with opposing interests, and inequalities of wealth and power in society. Rather than seeing society functioning harmoniously as the functionalists do, Marxists see society based on conflict between rival social classes (class conflict) with social institutions serving

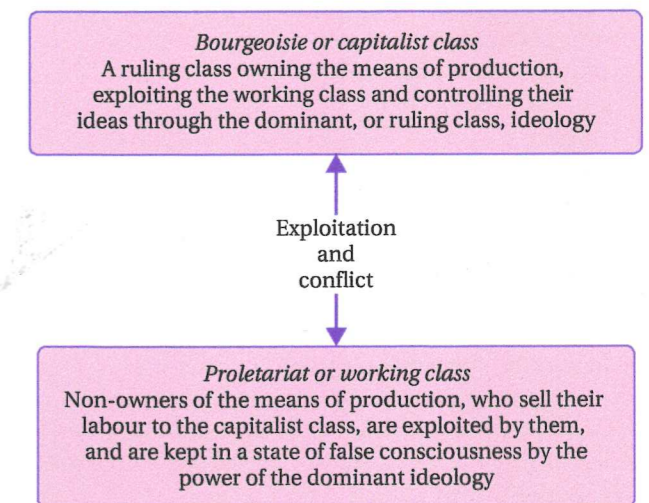


Figure 1.3 A summary of the Marxist view of society

to maintain the interests of a ruling class. However, like functionalists, Marxists see the behaviour of individuals as still largely determined or moulded by social institutions.

Activity

Comparing the views of functionalists and Marxists, which view of society do you think provides the most accurate and useful insights into the way British society is currently organized? Is it mainly based on consensus or conflict? Give reasons for your answer, with examples to illustrate the points you make.

SOCIAL ACTION OR INTERPRETIVIST THEORIES

Individual behaviour in everyday social situations is the main focus of **social action** or **interpretivist** approaches. These theories are concerned with discovering and thereby understanding the processes by which interactions between individuals or small groups take place, how people come to interpret and see things as they do, how they define their identities, and how the reactions of others can affect their view of things and their sense of their own identity.

Social action or interpretivist theories include the following features:

- Society and social structures/institutions are seen as the creation of individuals. An emphasis is placed on the free will of people to do things, in how they act and form their identities, rather than on the **determinism** of structuralism. Determinism means that the activities and identities of individuals are moulded by forces beyond their control, and they have little control or choice in how they behave. It almost suggests people are programmed to behave the way they do by society.
- An emphasis is placed on the individual and everyday behaviour rather than the overall structure of society. The focus of sociology is on the individual or small groups of individuals, not on the social structure as a whole. Rather than studying general trends and the wider causes of crime, for example, interpretivists are more likely to study a juvenile gang, to see how they came to be seen and labelled as deviant, and how they themselves see the world. This is sometimes referred to as a **micro approach**.
- People's behaviour is viewed as being driven by the meanings they give to situations: their definitions of a situation, or the way they see things and therefore behave, become very important. For example, a parent might interpret a baby crying as a sign of tiredness, hunger, fear or illness. The action the parent takes – putting the baby to bed, feeding her, comforting her or taking her to the doctor – will depend on how the parent defines the situation, and to understand the parent's behaviour we have to understand the meaning he or she gives to the baby's crying. In turn, how the parent acts in response to the meaning given to the baby's behaviour is likely to affect the baby's behaviour – whether it stops crying because it is no longer tired, hungry, afraid or ill.
- The main purpose of sociology is to study, uncover and interpret the meanings and definitions individuals give to their behaviour.

Social action approaches are illustrated in the cartoon on the right.

Activity

- 1 How do the attitudes and interpretations of other people affect your view of yourself? Give examples to illustrate the points you make.
- 2 Imagine you wanted to study the family and the education system. Suggest three things for each institution you might be interested in if you adopted a structuralist approach, and three things for each institution if you adopted an interpretivist approach.



Social action or interpretivist theories emphasize the free will and choice of individuals, and their role in creating the social structure

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective which is concerned with understanding human behaviour in face-to-face situations, and how individuals and situations come to be defined in particular ways through their encounters with other people.

Labelling refers to defining a person or group in a certain way – as a particular 'type' of person or group.

Determinism is the idea that people's behaviour is moulded by their social surroundings, and that they have little free will or control over how they behave.

A **micro approach** focuses on small groups or individuals, rather than on the structure of society as a whole.

Symbolic interactionism (Interactionism)

Symbolic interactionism, commonly referred to as simply 'interactionism' is a social action perspective particularly concerned with understanding human behaviour in face-to-face situations, and how individuals and situations come to be defined or classified in particular ways. This is known as **labelling**. It is also concerned with the consequences for individual behaviour of such definitions, since people will behave according to the way they see situations. For example, the sociologist's task is to understand the point of view and experience of, say, the disillusioned and hostile student who hates school, as well as of the teachers and others who label him or her as 'deviant'. Sociologists should try to understand how and why teachers classify some students as deviant, and what happens to the behaviour of those students once they have been classified in that way.

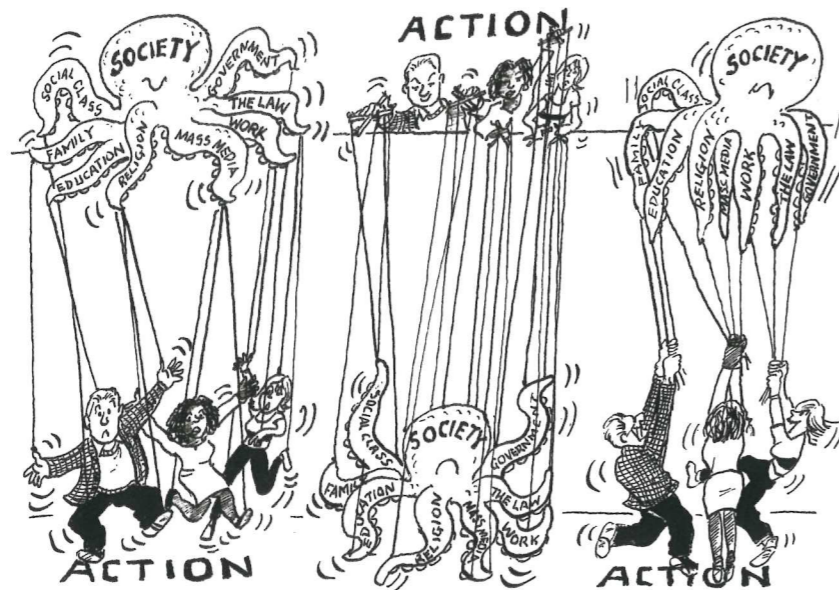
STRUCTURATION: A MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND ACTION

In real life, society is probably best understood using a mixture of both structural and action approaches. In other words, constraints from social institutions, like the family, work (and the income it does or doesn't produce), the law and education, limit and control the behaviour of individuals or groups, and have important influences on the formation of individual and group identities. However, individuals can, within limits, make choices within those structures and act accordingly. For example, the school is part of the education system – a social structure. Young people are constrained (forced) by law to go to school, and that school continues to exist even after generations of young people have come and gone. It therefore has an existence separate from the individuals who attend that school at any one time. That structure continues only so long as people support the law and agree to attend school – if everyone stopped sending their children to school, the system would either have to be changed or it would collapse. This shows human beings create and reinforce, or can change or destroy, these structures.

If we take a particular school or group of schools, while they are constrained by the demands of the national curriculum, the laws on education and the income they have, what happens within each individual school is controlled to some degree by the people closely connected to it – governors, students, teachers and parents. If attendance is poor, behaviour dreadful, teaching quality inadequate, exam results a catastrophe, and the school has a weak or incompetent headteacher, we may see this as a failing school. It might be inspected by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), and officially classified as a school requiring 'special



What consequences might follow for someone who has been labelled a deviant?



Structuralism

Social action or
interpretivist theories

Structuration

measures' to put it right. If parents opt to send their children to another school, it may face declining income, making things worse. As a result, it might face closure.

However, the school might be dramatically improved by teachers and others in the school community working harder to try and turn the school around. We might then eventually see it as a 'good' school. The school might be held up as a showpiece of improvement by the government, and used as a model or 'beacon school' for all other schools to follow. This change shows that, within social structures like education, human action – human activity – can make differences by changing those structures.

This means that, while people operate within the constraints of the social structure, they can also act, make choices, and sometimes change that social structure. It has to be supported by people, and constantly recreated: parents have to send their children to school because it is against the law not to do so, and most parents don't question this. But they do have to agree to this, and there are lots of cases where parents refuse to send their children to school because they believe there is something wrong with the school. If they refuse, especially a lot of them, then there would undoubtedly be a change in the schooling system.

This third or middle way, between structuralism and action theories, recognizes the importance both of the constraints of social structure and of choice: the actions people can take to accept or change those structures. This is Anthony Giddens's highly influential theory of **structuration**.

The three approaches, of structuralism, social action theory and structuration, are illustrated in the cartoon above.

Activity

Some argue that living in society is like living in a goldfish bowl – you are constrained by the bowl, even though you can't see the glass walls. In the light of what you have read in this chapter, discuss in a group to what extent you think this is an accurate view of society. Give reasons for your answers.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Feminism examines society particularly from the point of view and interests of women. Feminists argue that a lot of mainstream sociology has been focused on the concerns of men – 'malestream

Marxist feminism emphasizes the way in which women are doubly exploited – both as workers and as women.

Radical feminism focuses on the problem of men and male domination under **patriarchy** – the system whereby males dominate every area of society.

Liberal feminism focuses on measures to ensure that women have equal opportunities with men within the present system.

The New Right approach stresses individual freedom and self-help and self-reliance, reduction of the power and spending of the state, the free market and free competition between private companies, schools and other institutions, and the importance of traditional institutions and values.

Structuration is an approach between structuralism and social action theory. It suggests that, while people are constrained by social institutions, they also have choice and can at the same time take action to support or change those institutions.

Feminism is a view that examines the world from the point of view of women, who are seen as disadvantaged, with their interests ignored or devalued in society.

sociology' – and has failed to deal with the concerns and interests of women and the unequal position they have traditionally occupied in society. There are a number of strands within feminist approaches, but three of the main ones are **Marxist feminism**, **radical feminism** and **liberal feminism**. Marxist feminism takes a Marxist approach to the study of women and women's interests, and emphasizes the way in which women are doubly exploited – both as workers and as women. Radical feminism tends to focus more on the problem of **patriarchy** – the system whereby males dominate in every area of society, such as the family, the workplace and politics. For radical feminists, the main focus is on the problem of men and male-dominated society. Liberal feminism emphasizes the rights of women as individuals, and believes in removing all forms of discrimination to establish equality of opportunity for women with men. They want to ensure that women have equal opportunities with men within the present system, through steps such as changes to the law to stop sex discrimination, establishing equal pay, removing obstacles to women's full participation in society, and better childcare measures so that women can play their full part in paid employment. Marxist feminism and radical feminism fundamentally challenge the way society is presently organized and seek major social change, while liberal feminism basically accepts the system as it is but seeks to ensure women have equal opportunities with men within that system.

NEW RIGHT PERSPECTIVES

The **New Right** is more a political philosophy than a sociological perspective, and is associated mainly with the years of the Conservative government in Britain between 1979 and 1997 though some New Right ideas resurfaced during the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. This approach is, however, found in the work of some sociologists, and is referred to in various parts of this book. This approach has four main features:

- **An emphasis on individual freedom and self-interest**, and the need to reduce the power of the state to the minimum, reducing control of the individual by unnecessary state interference. Self-interest is given priority over the needs and welfare of others.
- **Reduced spending by the state**, by making individuals more self-reliant. An example is cutting welfare benefits and encouraging people into work to make them 'stand on their own two feet', and not expecting them to be dependent on the state for support if they are physically and mentally capable of supporting themselves. Lower taxes are seen as a means of increasing incentives for individuals and businesses to succeed.
- **A defence of the free market**. This means that free competition between individuals, companies, schools and other institutions is encouraged, to give individuals maximum choice between competing products, for instance in healthcare and education. An example might be giving parents a free choice of schools as consumers of education, and the right to reject some schools in favour of others, just as people choose between competing products in a supermarket. Support for private healthcare and the selling-off to private companies of state-owned industries like gas, electricity, water, British Airways and British Telecom were seen as ways of introducing competition in these areas, on the assumption that private companies with more competition would lead to lower prices and better-quality services or products.
- **A stress on the importance of traditional institutions and values**, such as traditional family life and traditional education, and a condemnation of anything that challenges these values. For example, lone parent families have been viciously attacked by the New Right, and blamed for a whole range of social problems, such as poor discipline and underachievement at school, immorality, crime, a culture of laziness, welfare dependency and the lack of a work ethic, and the existence of poverty.

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is an approach in sociology, as well as in other subjects, which stresses that society is changing so rapidly and constantly that it is marked by chaos, uncertainty and risk. Social structures like the family or social class are breaking down, and are being replaced by a whole range of different and constantly changing social relationships. Postmodernists argue that it is nonsense to talk of an institution called the family, for example, as people now live in such a wide range of ever-changing personal relationships. Gay and lesbian couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples who do not marry, multiple partners, divorce and remarriage, lone parents, stepparents and step-children, dual-income families with both partners working, people living alone, people living in shared households with friends, couples who have differing arrangements for organizing household tasks: all mean that any notion of the 'typical family' or 'the family as an institution' is absurd.

Postmodernists suggest society and social structures have ceased to exist, and have been replaced by a mass of individuals making individual choices about their lifestyles and identities, free from traditional constraints like social class, gender or ethnicity. Society is fragmenting into a mass of individuals and groups with such a wide diversity of interests and lifestyles, and is so constantly and rapidly changing, that it is essentially chaotic. This means that societies can no longer be understood through the application of 'big' theories or grand stories (called **metanarratives** – master narratives) like Marxism or functionalism, which seek to explain society as a whole. In any case, for postmodernists there is no single 'true' theory – no explanation is any better than any other, and different theories are just a variety of different points of view of equal value.

Postmodernists believe there are few of the social constraints on people that structuralist approaches identify. In postmodern societies, the emphasis is on individuals as consumers, making their own choices in education, health, their personal relationships and lifestyle. People can now form their own identities – how they see and define themselves and how others see and define them – and they can be whatever they want to be. People are free to make choices about their lifestyles, and the image they want to project to other people. Postmodern society involves a media-

Activity

Go through the following statements, and classify them as one of the following:

- Functionalist ● Marxist feminist ● liberal feminist ● postmodernist
- New Right ● Marxist ● radical feminist ● interpretivist

- (a) We will challenge all aspects of society not relevant to women, bring about a complete female takeover, eliminate the male sex and begin to create a female world.
- (b) The family is one of the main building blocks in creating the shared values which are such an important part of a stable society.
- (c) There are conflicts between the rich and the poor in our society. This is hardly surprising, given that the richest 10 per cent of the population own over half the country's wealth.
- (d) To make sure women have equal opportunities with men, there must be more free childcare provided.
- (e) Women are exploited both as women and as workers – they get exploited in paid employment, and they get exploited at home, where they do most of the housework and childcare and get nothing for it.
- (f) The ruling ideas in society are those of the ruling class.
- (g) Truth is whatever you choose to believe.
- (h) Some people may see an amber traffic light as a warning to speed up before it turns red. Others may see it as a sign to slow down before stopping. In order to understand such behaviour, you need to understand the meaning people give to events.
- (i) The education system is of major importance in preparing a well-trained and qualified labour force so the economy can develop and grow.
- (j) The education system prepares an obedient workforce which won't rock the boat and complain about being exploited at work.

Postmodernism is an approach that stresses that society is changing so rapidly and constantly that it is marked by chaos, uncertainty and risk, and is fragmented into many different groups, interests and lifestyles.

A **metanarrative** is a broad all-embracing 'big theory' (literally, a 'big story') or explanation for how societies operate.

A **social problem** is something that is seen as being harmful to society in some way, and needs something doing to sort it out.

A **sociological problem** is any social issue that needs explaining.

- (k) A person's identity is purely a matter of her or his personal choice, regardless of social factors like their class, gender or ethnicity.
- (l) If you think people are out to get you, even if they're not, then this is likely to affect the way you behave. To understand behaviour, we have to understand people's point of view.
- (m) Women will never achieve equality as long as men hold all the positions of power in society.
- (n) It is in everyone's interests to pull together at work for the benefit of society as a whole.
- (o) Although girls now do better than boys in education, they could do better still. We must make sure that any obstacles to girls' progress in school are removed.
- (p) We must make sure women get equal pay for equal work.
- (q) Some students are almost bound to fail, because teachers give them the impression that they're thick, and this undermines the self-confidence of the students, who then think it isn't worth bothering.
- (r) The welfare state has produced an underclass of people who are idle and don't want to work, and are content to scrounge off overgenerous welfare state benefits rather than get a job to support themselves.

The solution to this activity can be found on the teachers' pages of www.politybooks.com/browne.

saturated consumer culture in which individuals are free to pick 'n' mix identities and lifestyles, chosen from a limitless range of constantly changing consumer goods and leisure activities, which are available from across the globe.

Sociological problems, social problems and social policy

Social problems are matters that are seen as being harmful to society in some way, and as needing some action to sort them out. A social problem is nearly always a **sociological problem** – a social issue that needs explaining – but not all sociological problems are social problems.

Very often sociologists have been able to show by research that many social problems are not simply a result of the behaviour of individuals, but are created by wider social factors. A useful example is that of accidents.

ACCIDENTS AS A SOCIAL AND A SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Accidents are a social problem, and the accident statistics show a clear social pattern in terms of age, class and gender. For example, young people and old people, the poor and males are more likely to die or be seriously injured because of an accident. Accidents may happen to us individually, and sometimes randomly, but the causes are often socially influenced, by factors such as poor-quality housing, inadequate home care for the elderly, low income, dangerous working conditions and a dangerous environment, with busy roads and no safe play areas for children. Accidents provide an often dramatic and tragic, but nevertheless excellent, example of how seemingly random or individual experiences and events are in fact socially patterned and socially influenced.

The study of accidents shows how clear-sighted C. Wright Mills (1970) was when he wrote about the distinction between 'the personal troubles of milieu' (immediate social surroundings) and 'the public issues of social structure'. Every single accident is a personal experience but the social pattern of these experiences in Britain every year is for all of us a social problem – not least because of the harm they cause and the billions of pounds spent treating them by the National Health Service. This social problem is also a sociological problem – something which needs explaining by sociologists. The pattern of accident statistics illustrates well Mills's distinction between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' to which we referred above. To paraphrase Mills, when, in a nation of 60 million, only 1 person has an accident, then that is his or her personal trouble, and for its solution we look at the circumstances of that person. But when, in a nation of 60 million, 8 million have accidents, with a clear social pattern, that is a public issue and a social problem, and we cannot hope to find a solution within the personal situations and characteristics of individuals.