# TEACHING YOURSELF SOCIAL THEORY

David Harris

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For Maggie and Andy

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# Introduction

This Introduction outlines a rationale for writing this book, but it is not primarily addressed to student readers directly, unlike everything else that follows. I wanted to describe my intentions in more abstract terms, relating as much to colleagues as to student readers. I suggest that students might find it more profitable to proceed to Chapter 1 and return here afterwards if they are interested.

I hope colleagues will consider this rationale as a partial explanation at least for some of the things that they might find controversial in the body of the text. There are the usual sins of omission and commission, but I have tried particularly to avoid an excessively 'academic' style, for example, and this involves a clear risk: colleagues might come to think of my approach as simply an inferior version of a 'correct' or 'acceptable' style, whereas I have tried deliberately to develop it as an alternative. I do not want to seem too defensive about this, but it is worth stating my case, even if only to provoke debate.

I have tried to write a book that will introduce students to aspects of social theory in a different way. I have drawn on my experience in teaching to do this, but I have also kept in mind findings of some of the well-known work on student learning styles that has been so influential in recent discussions about course design (see, for example, Entwistle and Ramsden 1983, or Morgan 1993). It is unusual to use this work as a strategy to guide the writing of a book, rather than teaching as such, but I am interested to see if it brings positive outcomes, despite the risks.

I have some reservations about this work, which we will come to below, but many people know the main findings, which are that there are three basic learning styles widely found among students in the UK and elsewhere: the 'deep', 'surface' and 'strategic' approaches. There are several more recent alternative classifications and some subtypes, but the basic divisions will serve us for now. The research projects involved go on to suggest that the 'deep' approach pays off in terms of delivering a greater understanding of academic subjects. This is revealed in terms of gaining both good grades and a sense of involvement and pleasure. Those pursuing 'surface' approaches
engaged in unrewarding 'reproducing behaviour' – and still get poorer grades.

Some implications arise immediately. To be brief, it might be argued that it is essential to try to get my readers to adopt a 'deep' approach, not only because this approach seems to pay dividends, but also because social theory seems impossible to understand unless one can take an approach that looks beneath the surface of social life. It might be possible to 'reproduce' texts of social theory in assignments, but not to be able to 'locate oneself' in them, or use social theory to ask 'syllabus-independent' questions about the social world. I find many of my students attempting to manage social theory in this frustrating and infantilising manner, trying desperately to 'please teacher' by memorising favoured phrases or stock arguments, attempting to assemble little nuggets of facts and information, quotes and paraphrases which can be scrambled together with very little understanding. I have read too many essays over the years that can offer a seemingly sophisticated account of the intellectual origins of Durkheim's sociology, mentioning Fustel de Coulanges and Comte as if they were old friends, for example, yet which seem unable to distinguish between mechanical and organic solidarity.

I have even met colleagues drafted into teaching social theory courses, sometimes unwillingly it seems, who adopt the same approach, and for them it must be very discouraging indeed to experience teaching material in which they have never felt secure to students who react with open indifference and sometimes even hostility.

I am not condemning such students or colleagues. I am also aware that there are strong pressures, emanating from the system of higher education itself very often, which encourage a particular kind of 'surface' or 'strategic' approach in students (and in lecturing staff). I call this an 'instrumental' approach, drawing upon some slightly different and more sociological work on how students cope with academic life (such as Becker et al. 1995), and believe it can be clearly linked to more general work on the rationalisation or 'intensification' of work, or on cultural alienation.

It is tempting to ignore this uncomfortable area altogether, and to address only the ideal student (very often, an idealised juvenile version of oneself). Writing a book can offer this sort of sanctuary, in my view, where one is free to address readers in a spirit of detachment, and without the need to impose on them university regulations and assessment schemes (incidentally, I think that teaching on the Web offers even more potential for pleasures of this kind – see Harris 2002).

However, I want to be both more realistic and more ambitious, and to attempt to engage the instrumental student as well. I try to do this here by attempting to deliver summaries of well-known works, to organise arguments which are accessible, and to offer some asides and comments, all of which might 'add value' to a student attempting to assemble materials for an assignment.

This involves more than just attempting to use 'plain English', of course. We know the problems with such attempts from Derrida (see Kamuf 1991: xii) – 'Standard notions of clarity . . . must be seen as, themselves, obscurantist since they encourage a belief in the transparency of words to thoughts, and thus a "knowledge" constructed on this illusion') or from Bourdieu (1993: 21) – 'In order to break with the social philosophy that runs through everyday words and also in order to express things that ordinary language cannot express . . . the sociologist has to resort to invented words which are thereby protected . . . from the naïve projection of common sense'.

I want to show how an instrumental student might be able to develop a 'deeper' approach, involving a transition to specialist terms and concepts, if only for 'strategic' reasons at first. In teaching, an initial appeal to such a student might involve pointing out that a deeper approach does genuinely deliver better grades. In this sense the descriptions of the 'deep' student can be reread not as a description of an abstract 'learning style' but rather as a (rare) attempt to clarify the 'high aesthetic' of academic life, to borrow an argument from Bourdieu (1988).

The arguments about the pleasures that the deep approach also delivers might be left for a more gradual kind of revelation – involving me in what might be called a 'seduction strategy', although I am worried about the manipulative undertones in this term. I think these pleasures are genuine and important ones, and that the satisfaction of feeling relatively secure and 'at home' in social theory is a major benefit. I still think of it as a right, to which all students are entitled, regardless of the relatively humble nature of the institutions in which they might find themselves. However, it is also a matter of acquired taste, to be developed in conditions of 'optimal challenge' – too much challenge and 'hostility mixed with panic' (Bourdieu 1986) can result from the encounter; too little and one settles for a complacent and conservative cultural relativism that tamely agrees that social theory is only for an elite.

To turn to specifics, I try to 'deepen' students' approaches by drawing initially on the work of Ramsden and the others as an operational guide for action, an heuristic. Thus if the 'deep' approach involves an ability to connect current material with material that has been studied in the past, I attempt to encourage this both explicitly, with my own examples, and by trying to resist any suggestion that one can close off discussions, or put them into convenient categories. Again, if the 'deep' approach involves an ability to grasp the principles rather than to try to learn a lot of facts, it becomes important to write that way, to avoid excessive description (and excessive theoretical asides) and to try to focus on underlying issues and debates.

These two strategies can be brought together by a deliberate attempt to connect theoretical debates with much more mundane everyday and common-sense issues and concerns. It is not always easy to wean oneself away from the more familiar 'academic' context in which one operates, however. This often prioritises a rather esoteric 'scholastic' relevance to what one is discussing. There is more than ineffective teaching, boredom or irrelevance at stake, as Bourdieu (2000: 25) points out:

> . . . academic aristocratism draws [a line] between the thinker and the 'common man'. . . . This aristocratism owes its success to the fact that it offers to the inhabitants of scholastic universes a perfect 'theodicy of their privilege', an absolute justification of that form of forgetting of history, the forgetting of the social conditions of possibility of scholastic reason.

In summarising Bourdieu at an academic conference, for example, I have discussed with colleagues the connections between his work and that of Merleau-Ponty or Ricoeur in a fully 'scholastic' manner. Such discussions probably would be entirely redundant and exclusionary if addressing first-year students, however. They would probably not know yet who Ricoeur was, let alone be interested right away in any connection between his work and Bourdieu's. They would have enough difficulty in grasping the significance of Bourdieu, without having to locate him in a welter of other names and theories. We should not keep from them the need to develop this scholarly understanding eventually, but it seems wise to acknowledge their more mundane or even 'practical' interests initially. Students too, like the 'common man' in the quote above, simply can be fully 'absorbed by the trivial concerns of everyday existence' (Bourdieu 2002: 25).

In much of what follows in this book, I attempt to put my intended student audience very much in the foreground, for example by starting with the issues that are discussed in the press and on TV, and then trying to move fairly gently into more specialist theoretical arguments. The outstanding examples of such a technique are found in cultural studies, perhaps, as in the work stimulated by Ritzer (1993) and his discussion of 'McDonaldization'; as many colleagues agree, this work is an excellent and accessible route into more technical discussions of Weber, and rival accounts of modernity and postmodernism.

A special focus for this book is based on the observation that what does unite us all is that we are engaged in higher education. In referring to this context, risks are run once more, and one has to balance carefully the need to retain a 'professional' relationship with the perfectly valid interest in theorising even about intellectuals and their organisations.

I have always found it important to try to understand the cultural context of learning for current students as well. This is one of my objections to the focus on 'approaches' to study as discrete psychological matters. I have explored these reservations elsewhere (Harris 1993), but the main point is to suggest that there are strong value commitments and hints of social distancing in the discussion of 'deep' and 'surface' approaches as well. Thus the usual lists of characteristics contain an unmistakable moral objection to surface approaches, in my view, seen best, perhaps, in the remark that a surface approach views completion of the task 'as an external imposition' (Morgan 1993: 73). I think this remark requires us to investigate this attitude – why might this be so for so many students, and, equally, why might so many academics feel resentful, superior or insecure by discovering such a stance?

An answer might be found initially in reminding ourselves of some sociological banalities about the social role of the academy in necessarily disciplining students, or 'reproducing the social relations of' capital or patriarchy (according to choice). Assessment is at the sharp end of the tension between the desire to 'pursue arguments for their own sake', and these social functions, which are usually seen as far less honourable, although they are held by powerful stakeholders. We know from Bourdieu's work that these tensions are likely to be classically misrecognised, of course, as a clash between those possessing different degrees of some neutral 'expertise' – hence the unusual disdain for instrumental students as dangerous 'outsiders', who somehow challenge the whole ethos of university life.

However, more practical implications also arise. There are no clear guidelines in Bourdieu, alas, to suggest ways in which possessors of different 'aesthetics' might be able to communicate effectively with each other, although we have some idea of how the powerplay between them manifests itself in 'structures of judgement'. But there are some suggestions from a much earlier tradition in the sociology of education on how to manage an 'intercultural' classroom, where pedagogues attempt to build bridges between the cultures of their pupils and the academic culture which they represent. Pioneering work by Barnes et al. (1971) was supplemented here by more recent interest in 'critical pedagogies' of various kinds (see, for example, Giroux 1992). Many of the applications of this work have been developed in the context of dealing with students from different ethnic minorities, but my interest is in dealing with students with a range of different cultural habituses, possessing different amounts and mixes of cultural capital.

Some basic principles seem apparent at least. For one thing, it does not hurt to express a certain level of respect for and sympathy with the cultural values of such students, to engage in a little 'phatic' communication which 'maintains the contact between narrator and addressee' (Barthes 1977: 95) in order to build bridges for later, more challenging discussions, or to listen to and engage in common-sense argument before sliding into more technical forms. This sort of thing can be manipulative, and it can also go badly wrong, as when middle-aged teachers or writers head unerringly towards misusing the street jargon of a decade ago. What stifles initial communication altogether, though, is a perception of disapproval and hostility, or a thinly suppressed intention to disqualify, as student after student has reported, for example: 'The only time I can remember receiving a positive response to a piece of writing was on an occasion when I used the ... book provided and strung together ... [elements of a piece of work] ... in a language I did not speak' (Plummer 2000: 166).

However, another form of phatic communication can sometimes be attempted with less immediate risk – an ability to see the cultural flaws and sometimes the symbolic violence in academic discourse 'from the inside'. It is important to encourage critical engagement with one's work by being open and critical about it oneself. Obviously, one welcomes sophisticated academic criticism, but I find that it is important to permit less sophisticated kinds too: sometimes these need to be structured, much as when a 'straight man' 'feeds' a comic. The occasional attempt to distance oneself as an academic from perceived orthodoxies can be helpful, which is the reverse of the more common tendency to pose as a perfect and natural representative of that orthodoxy. Any reader of Goffman will also recognise the manipulative and self-aggrandising elements in such 'role distance'. All of these techniques seem much easier to practise in face-to-face communication, where one's performance can be monitored and adjusted fairly rapidly, but, despite the risks, I have decided to attempt some of them in this book as well.

This is not only a 'seductive' device for me, but also an expression of my own sometimes deeply ambivalent and 'open' feelings about academic culture. I do not see how we can expect students simply to attempt to adopt academic culture as a way of life: as Bourdieu indicates, it is possible to do that only if one is financially and culturally secure in that milieu, and probably has been so from birth. Few modern students would be willing to undertake the painful and life-long labour of the self-surveilling autodidact devoted to the pursuit of academic interests, which is Bourdieu's main alternative.

The reality for many students is that they must 'normalise' academic life, and manage it alongside many other competing demands for their allegiance and their time (see Hebdige's essay on the reactions of his students as he struggled to wean them off *The Face* and on to more 'academic' journals, in Hebdige 1988). It is partly that the predictions of some postmodernist thinkers (like Lyotard 1984) are correct in suggesting that university discourses and their claims to privilege and to emancipatory potential are very much in doubt. Universities have also done much to dispel their own mystique by appearing so frequently to the newcomer (and to their parents) as thoroughly modern profit-seeking corporations. Scepticism can be lived out on a daily basis as students manage families and working lives alongside the rather limited and sometimes far more hostile and manipulative social relations on offer in the academy. I am aware that making these points may induce an intention to disqualify me in any colleagues who happen to read my work, but again, all genuine communication carries risk.

There is a more direct sense in which the cultural preferences of possible readers have also been borne in mind. I have developed some web-based materials, which offer a complementary level of analysis to that attempted in this book. I have noticed that students often seem happier to browse websites than to read books (it is usually the opposite for colleagues, however); approval or disapproval of this practice seems irrelevant if you want to communicate with modern students. There are also definite advantages offered by web-based materials in that a writer can offer 'levels' of hypertext to 'individualise' teaching, attempting to solve the problem of different levels of difficulty, or different motives for learning. There are drawbacks too, including a danger of adding to the relativism and 'normalisation' I mentioned above: it is rare for students to stay on task exclusively as they browse and surf, and confine their attentions solely to 'serious' academic sites.

To take one obvious problem, there is so much material available on the Web as it is. If you merely enter key terms or names into a search engine you will encounter dozens of websites. I have done this recently with terms like 'ethnomethodology' and names like Elias, Becker and Bourdieu, and discovered some rich materials. But you need to know what you are seeking; you need some underlying principles to guide you to material that will be useful. It is this that separates out mere browsing from purposeful learning.

I have tried to provide the reader of this book with a list of 'reading guides' on my personal website (www.arasite.org/). These offer summaries of some of the key readings I have suggested in the book. Readers can gain a preliminary understanding of the principles of the arguments by reading the book, and then choose to pursue these arguments in more depth by locating the appropriate 'reading guide'. I hope that they will do so, if only from an initially instrumental interest in writing better assignments.

'Reading guides' also focus on underlying principles, with a minimum of scholastic detail. I have attempted an accurate if occasionally theoretically naïve summary and restricted my own comments to a minimum as well. These 'guides' are meant to be an additional step into academic culture, for the non-traditional and non-scholastic student, standing between textbooks and lecture notes and the original works themselves, and demonstrating ways in which one might indeed take notes from famous books and cope with some of the more challenging formulations and arguments. Some of the 'guides' contain hyperlinks to additional web-based material, either found on my own site, or on the sites of others. Students can follow these conveniently, and thus build up a set of electronic resources and files of their own. The important goal of 'syllabus independence', another key characteristic of the 'deep' approach, becomes achievable if students can be encouraged to search electronic materials autonomously: my initial guidance is meant to be extensively modified or abandoned as confidence grows. For the complete beginner especially, I think my easy-to-use and low-technology reading guides are a good way to establish confidence.

Finally, I want to encourage students to interact with the materials, both those in this book and those on my website. As usual, basic and simple forms of interaction are to be encouraged first, and it might be necessary for the more confident to skip those. I have not included extensive 'in text questions' or other familiar self-assessment items in this book, despite their recent popularity in conventional teaching (they have been around in distance education since 1970 at least). For one thing, there is evidence that they do not sufficiently engage readers, and many students simply ignore them altogether (Henderson and Nathenson 1984). There is a danger that they will be seen as heavy-handed, patronising or dominating. More technically, much will depend on the sort of reflexivity they are designed to encourage – reflexivity on the task as defined (or imposed) by the writer, or a 'deeper' reflexivity designed to broaden horizons, engage readers in reflection about their learning and its characteristic 'blocks' (engaging in 'metacognition' is a popular way to think of this). Then there is the whole issue of emancipatory reflexivity, so to speak, of the kind that invites students to 'look behind' the whole process of education, asking questions about the social context or role of assessment and the university, for example; the classic question here is one I raise below about how university education comes to be provided in that form. I also offer further thoughts in the two online introductory essays on my website (Harris 2002).

Generally, mine is a more 'cultural' strategy, as I have indicated. The idea is to provoke thought primarily in and by the text itself, so to speak, not only in terms of its content but also through the openness of its form. More strategically, I have devised an online tutorial on my website which begins with simple forms of electronic interaction with files – altering fonts, backgrounds or margins, for example, going on to suggest more extensive forms of cutting, pasting and inserting paragraphs (including paragraphs written by the user), and ending with the suggestion that materials be structured in order to identify 'deep' principles and more 'surface' elements such as introductions, examples, illustrations, and so on. In this way, I hope to move students from an initial interest in developing more sophisticated forms of plagiarism to practical techniques for the critical reading of texts. If all goes well, they will be teaching themselves social theory.

## Social theory and the university context

Waters' excellent book (Waters 1994) begins by warning the would-be student that social theory characteristically takes quite a different unusual stance towards the social world. Social theory is unusually abstract, 'technical and arcane', general, systematic and formal, Waters reminds us, and there will be a problem for anyone approaching this topic from the usual engaged, involved, unsystematic stances of 'common-sense'. Theoretical statements 'must be independent. They must not be reducible to the explanations participants themselves offer for their own behaviour' (Waters 1994: 3).

This is really quite a good description of the current state of play with social theory courses, and it accurately describes the most fundamental problem in learning to study them, which might be indicated by asking how social theory courses got that way. Young (1971) once asked how the sort of education which many people fail at came to be provided in the first place, and we might begin with this as a suitable provocation too.

I should say that this is far too ambitious a question for me to answer seriously in this book, but I hope it is clear at least that a suitable answer would have to involve a history of the university, as well as a history of social theory. There happen to be some interesting specific histories which show how the development of the university, its faculty structure and the precise shape of the academic subjects that emerge are interwoven: (see for example, Bourdieu 1988; Collins 1994; and Gouldner 1979).

My task in this book is far more modest. I hope to show how an analysis of the institutional dimension is required in order to understand particular developments in apparently abstract theoretical arguments. I outline some of the general examples in the next chapter, but the importance of the university context arises quite frequently during discussions in other chapters as well. To take some quick examples, it seems clear to me that particular 'perspectives', notoriously those of British A-Level Sociology, only make sense by considering how professional academics actually go about their work. We know, for example, that they have to synthesise various approaches, and distinguish them from rivals, in order to organise and pursue coherent 'research programmes' (this is the term originally introduced by Lakatos (1979) to explain some characteristics of theory development in natural sciences).

I think traces of these rather interesting but also arbitrary attempts to group things together into some coherent programme can be detected in the emergence of 'action sociology' in Britain in the 1970s, which joined together work that originally belonged to very different traditions – American interactionism and Weberian sociology, for example. Something similar happened in radical sociologies of youth culture, media studies and education in the 1970s, where a looser cluster of different radical traditions was collected at first; it took some time, and an agreed turn towards Gramsci, to sort and systematise these traditions. Doubtless there are other examples too, but what happened in those cases is that a number of quite diverse and different theoretical elements were synthesised, weighed, evaluated and considered, and then eventually homogenised into a more coherent programme for much more 'practical' reasons than might appear to be the case. It need not have been like this at all. It must be quite puzzling to people coming recently to those traditions, and looking only for logical or theoretical reasons for their coherence.

I think that the requirements of designing and running high-quality university teaching also have definite effects on the ways in which theoretical elements are grouped together. Courses become 'teaching objects', in Bennett's (1980) very interesting account of the emergence of a famous and definitive Open University course in cultural studies. I explore this in more detail in Chapter 6, but what I want to argue here is that the institutional background of theoretical work is crucial. It provides us with an explanation of some of the twists and turns and emphases found in social theory.

To take another example, we shall encounter feminist criticism, like that launched by Fraser (1989; and see the online reading guide) against some prominent male theorists such as Foucault and Habermas, on the grounds that they have ignored gender politics in their development of critical social theory. It is easy to see this as a classic omission by remote and smugly secure university professionals who do not need to worry about the politics of gaining access to welfare or housing benefits. It is tempting to think of Gellner (1968; and see the online reading guide) teasing linguistic philosophers of the day by suggesting that their interest in the detailed unravelling of language games is a philosophy suitable for gentlemen ensconced in the cosy and protected environment of Oxford University. However, it might also be possible to see particular theoretical analyses as the results of very powerful political interests, albeit those of university professionals and not 'ordinary people'. University professionals have their struggles to win space for their own views, to attract resources to them, and to attempt to beat off rivals, including a rather specialist attempt to incorporate rival theories into more suitable conceptual schemes.

I think that another prominent development of social theory can also be traced to the university contexts in which theorising takes place and the peculiar politics that go on inside them. This is the tendency for theory to become more abstract and self-referential as it has proceeded. Ritzer (2001) has described this as the tendency to develop 'metatheory'. Feminists such as Humm (1992; and see the online reading guide) refer to a 'first' and 'second wave' feminism, which seems to sketch the same kind of trajectory. To simplify, feminism first concerned itself with the struggle to establish women's rights, but then subsequently found itself forced to engage in theoretical struggle against rival theories themselves.

Gellner (1968) has also offered us an account of how theory evolves like this. As thought develops, it begins with 'preoccupation with objective issues . . . its centre of gravity . . . still lies outside the universities'. When philosophy gets professionalised, more formal themes emerge at the expense of 'mere "content"'. Such philosophy can still be critical, undermining orthodoxies. The final stage in the 'emasculation of thought' requires a rejection of this whole tradition, in the name of an accommodation with the 'reality of the objective world' (Gellner 1968: 291). This accords nicely with 'what the more comfortable Dons had always been inclined to believe . . . that the world was much as it seemed to them' (Gellner 1968: 291). Teasing aside, and generalising away from just Oxford philosophy, I think this evolution is impossible to understand without looking for the role of specific university-employed intellectuals whose job becomes one of developing social theory in a particular professional and scholastic direction, inevitably losing connections with the everyday concerns of those outside the university as their specific agenda comes to dominate their deliberations.

It might be seen as if I am accusing my fellow academics of some moral flaw here, but this is not my interest. The kind of advanced division of labour that produces the modern university will almost certainly produce a separation in culture, segmentation between politically motivated theorists and theoretically motivated theorists (taking politics here to mean a very general interest in engaging with the world). The point really is to try to explain why social theory often appears in the form that Waters has described.

It might be worth explaining to students that it may not be their fault if they find social theory difficult to grasp. Probably it was not written for them in the first place, but either addressed to some quite different 'public' in the past, or constructed with rather specialist professional and intellectual constraints in mind in the present. I have discussed these points, and some implications arising from them, in the two introductory files on my website, and offered some suggestions for those students interested in investigating the specific history and context of academic social theory and their effects.

I have tried to pursue a definite pedagogic intent in this book. First of all, I have tried to focus on the sort of social theory that is still recognisably connected to the 'issues outside the university' that Gellner describes. Thinking of these issues, the bedrock of practical concerns with freedom, constraints, emancipation, struggles for recognition of minorities, and so on, does not entirely cede the ground to the more specialist intellectual theoreticians. It gives relative newcomers a chance to find a way into theory. To this end, I have chosen examples that can be useful for pedagogic purposes from a number of fields, including sociology, media studies and cultural studies, rather than keeping to the usual academic subject boundaries. I hope readers will see how arguments in one 'applied' area can be linked to arguments in another, perhaps via 'deeper' principles – if this happens, readers can experience teaching themselves social theory.

Secondly, I have organised my book into sections based on broad themes in social theory and then into short chapters around common writers or approaches. This cannot be comprehensive, of course. I have spread critical debates over two chapters, in many cases, so as to keep the length of each one down and to give the reader time for a pause. I have found students like to stop to consolidate their thoughts before being rushed on breathlessly to rival approaches or critiques. I have not always assumed it is necessary to 'balance' contributions immediately, and in the usual ways.

Thirdly, I have tried to avoid the usual kinds of university textbook summaries of theoretical issues, which proceed in a classically specialist, and sometimes rather scholastic, fashion. I admire these texts, such as Waters (1994), May (1996), Turner (1996) or Ritzer (1996) – the last-mentioned is the most accessible introduction of all, in my view — and I suggest that you read them together with this one. But I also think, in line with lots of other teachers, that you might need some other kind of access to works of social theory, again to give you the chance to impose some sort of agenda of your own.

Hence the book itself is one component of a double strategy to encourage 'syllabus independence', the other component being the online material, with its 'individualising' potentials that should be seen as a necessary component as well. No book can offer a self-sufficient and exhaustive coverage of social theory, of course; mine tries to lead outwards, to other books, to websites, to a whole network waiting to be explored. This network structure, with the opportunity for guided exploration, is a prerequisite, a necessary but not sufficient condition, for any strategy aimed at permitting students to teach themselves.

# PART I

# 1 Economic Constraints: Marxism and the Mode of Production

In this chapter, I am going to discuss some themes that will lead us into marxist modes of analysis. Marx's work is a real challenge right at the start. In social theory his work has produced a long tradition of analysis that until quite recently had been almost an orthodoxy. This only adds to the problems for students in 'the West', who are likely to think of marxism as a pretty unpleasant political creed associated with repressive regimes in 'the East' that have now been overthrown.

Winnowing out the academic concepts from this unfortunate public image is not easy, and when we first encounter some of the work it can look alien and odd. Incidentally, I am going to follow one of the rather mysterious scholarly conventions we mentioned earlier in referring to marxism, with a small 'm' throughout, even though my spellchecker does not like it. This is simply in order to acknowledge the work of other writers, as well as Marx himself, in the construction and development of a substantial body of work; it is a kind of political correctness, if you will, that reserves its position in the huge debate about the role of named individual authors in developing theory.

Teaching about marxism can be difficult since students often perceive the work of Marx and Engels as both 'difficult' and 'political'. If students encounter any marxists these days, they are likely to appear as rather quaintly old-fashioned, far too 'serious', too 'committed', and with a capacity to make listeners feel guilty about the inequalities in society while offering deceptively simplistic solutions. Other problems can arise when lecturers specifically seem to be committed to marxist work – marxist sociology can look and sound like moralising or 'preaching'.

These are problems that need to be acknowledged in any teaching. Marxism is not a neutral approach to social life. It has always been woven through with political commitments: 'Philosophers have always sought to understand the world. . . . The point, however, is to change it' (Marx 1968: 367). Marx's style is not always calm and dispassionate, he writes scathing critiques of his opponents (with apparently devastating effects on their self-esteem), and there is seldom doubt as to whose side he is on.

Further, the entanglement of analysis and politics is not seen as a problem in marxism; indeed it is a sign that we are on the right track. There is an explicit rejection of the rather convenient way in which other analysts have tried to separate the worlds of economics and politics (and the world of social life for that matter). Such separations lead to misunderstandings that have political consequences, where apparently abstract theory ends up justifying the way things are (one version of what Marx meant by 'ideology'). Seeing the connections between these areas is also one of the main reasons Marx thought that he had developed a full social theory, a 'science' with a broad scope and with considerable power to explain a range of events. As with other sciences, the ability actually to do something, to cause or at least to predict social change, was another key factor in knowing you were on the right lines. First, though, you had to criticise those 'ideological' understandings held by others.

Of course, we do not have to share personally those political or academic commitments in order to grasp what marxism wants to say about modern societies like ours. Part of the challenge of doing sociology is to try to grasp arguments that might seem quite alien to our personal beliefs and experiences, although we noted (in the online introductory essays on the website – Harris 2002) that this is a stance which is not always easily acquired.

In what follows, I am going to try to be an advocate for marxism (and for other approaches in subsequent chapters, of course). I should confess that I am going to try to play down the political commitments in favour of the more technical approaches to understanding social life. Marx himself would probably not have approved of this rather 'distanced' approach. As a pedagogic strategy it has risks as well as advantages – I might be able to play down some of the unfashionable politics only at the expense of playing up some of the other problems of technical difficulty.

## The economy as external reality

Let me begin the discussion by returning to the 'root metaphor' that features in this section – society as 'external reality'. This is an abiding theme in Marx's work and one of his most successful and relevant. In his day (1818–83), changes in the economic system were making a clear impact upon the whole of social life. There was the development of factories and mass production, the growth of towns and cities, the development of what might be called these days the 'infrastructure' – all the transport, trading, financial and banking systems needed by the new companies and enterprises – and the changes in the political system to manage the new requirements. Tremendous social changes ensued, in work, leisure, living patterns, family life, education, and health and welfare. The substantial growth of this new system, seemingly under its own steam(!), must have appeared as an external force to many of the people alive at that time, altering their lives dramatically and raising all sorts of problems about how to regulate or control it. This vision of industrial society operating apparently 'on its own', regardless of anyone's wishes, is common to Durkheim and to Weber too.

I am sure it is quite a common image of society today, probably more common than it was in my youth. When I first studied economics in the 1960s, there was a rather smug view that the economy was under full control, that we (or our governments) knew how to run the system to avoid booms and slumps, to maintain a steady growth of prosperity. The 'bad old days' of economic depression, grinding poverty, slums, homelessness and unemployment seemed far away, a nightmare our parents had once lived through.

We can all appreciate much more readily today that the economic system has not been domesticated so easily, of course, and that all those social ills are still around. Unemployment is probably not too unlikely a fate for many students, and poverty, indebtedness or homelessness seem still to disturb the sleep even of those in employment. Even the relatively well-off have seen recent substantial fluctuations in the value of their wages, houses, savings and investments, and have felt the cold winds of job insecurity once more.

Most of us have felt the anxiety and insecurity of having to depend in these matters on remote and abstract institutions like stock exchanges, governments (both our own and overseas), multinational corporations, obscure aspects of international finance and banking (exchange rates, common currencies). Our lives can be affected deeply by what can look like mere whims of powerful individual entrepreneurs like Rupert Murdoch or Bill Gates or by the schemes of once little-known multinationals like Enron. These strange bodies and individuals are remote from our experience most of the time, and they operate in ways in which we take little interest – but a decision taken elsewhere can undo all our careful efforts to save, take away our work, close down our local hospital, uproot the woodland we have known for decades or expose us to new risks of disease or injury.

Of course, it is worth stressing the nice surprises that the economic system delivers periodically too. There are the great technological breakthroughs from moon landings to microchips, medical advances, the enormously increased flow of consumer goods and services, and the real growth in incomes for the richer segments of the richer countries.

A number of commentators, including marxists, want to suggest that both the nice and nasty aspects of the system owe a lot to the existence of a key institution in our society – 'private property'. Marxists have done much to analyse the phenomenon of private property, to explain its importance and to insist upon its rather strange social nature. This is still an important analytic task – the institution is so widespread and common that we tend to think it quite natural to own things, to possess the power to dispose of them as we please. But it is not a natural institution at all, for marxists, but a rather recent one, historically speaking, and one which has involved real political struggle.

To clear the ground a little I should make it clear that by 'property' I do not mean the personal trinkets and possessions that we all cherish. These items are 'private property' too, and they do have an important role in helping us retain a sense of our own identities. For marxists at least, however, the more important kind of private property centres on the ownership of productive assets – factories, land, machinery, industrial wealth – owned directly or indirectly as shares in companies. It is a common practice in 'bourgeois' social science to confuse things by giving them the same generalised name, Marx tells us on several occasions, and this kind of private property often gets lumped together with the nicer, more agreeable kind mentioned above. In this way, personal private property helps dignify and legitimate the industrial kind of private property – 'private property' is 'natural'; it is a universal good; it is an essential aspect of personal freedom; evil communists or terrorists want to take away even people's personal possessions; and so on.

Ownership of this latter important kind of private property gives tremendous potential for controlling key aspects of social life. Owners of industrial property have legal rights to benefit from that ownership and to dispose of their property if they cease to gain a benefit. The negative impact, on others who might not own factories but who work in them, for example, is not a sufficient reason to prevent the legal owner of an asset disposing of it, nor is any long-term adverse impact on the environment. There is a legal framework to regulate the ownership and use of assets, but it is a very loose one on the whole, as recent scandals about 'tax loopholes' in the UK reveal. To take more specific examples, it is possible to acquire assets with borrowed money, or to take control of an enterprise if one owns merely a working majority of shares. A number of notorious individuals in Britain in the 1980s benefited considerably by taking advantage of these favourable conditions to borrow enough money to acquire majority shareholdings in famous British companies (at a time when the price of shares was low) and then promptly to close them down and sell off the productive assets (worth more than the value of the shares at the time). People who had worked in those factories all their lives, customers who wanted to continue to buy the goods, small shareholders who had invested their savings in the company, were powerless to prevent this perfectly legal form of 'asset stripping'.

There have been many examples of this kind of procedure in the UK in recent years. The *Guardian* newspaper (2 August 1996) reported how one entrepreneur stood to make a personal profit of some £40 million by selling off a transport company which he had bought as a result of the British government's policy of privatising formerly state-owned assets. The political party elected to government at the time (by a minority of all voters in fact) was able to use its legal ownership of state assets to sell them at a price they thought suitable, and then the market promptly revalued those assets at a much higher figure, to the great delight of the new owners. Some private individuals were able to borrow enough money to set up a company to acquire some of the assets; the British government helped them secure a substantial loan partly by guaranteeing a high level of the company's income for the first eight years. During their short period of ownership of the company (seven months), the directors simply sat on their assets and waited for the market value to rise; certainly they showed little interest in investing in the actual business of the company, the *Guardian* reported. This kind of short-term approach, with companies being operated to provide maximum returns to current shareholders, even if this means little investment in the actual business, has been identified as a chronic problem for the British economy (Hutton 1995).

Revelations of misleading accounting practices offer another example. What seems to have happened in the companies affected is that senior managers engaged firms of consultants to advise them on maximising the figures showing company growth. One strategy involved estimating future returns on investment and including these estimates as actual revenue in any one year. The same firms, appearing in the guise of accountants this time, often audited company books and thus legitimated these rather controversial financial practices. Senior company management benefited directly from the increase in share values since they were major shareholders themselves, and they often received special bonuses linked to share prices. The scale of this sort of exercise is revealed in a report in the *Guardian* newspaper (9 July 2002): Enron paid out 'almost $750 million (£517 million) in bonuses in a year when net income was $975 million (£672 million)'. The eventual public disclosure of these practices and arrangements led to a loss of confidence, the financial near-collapse of global companies such as Enron and WorldCom, and one of the worst falls in the stockmarket in recent memory. Apart from these substantial real economic consequences, which had a personal effect since one of my own insurance policies matured during the crisis at a very low value, it is interesting that the scandal revealed that the apparently fixed, natural and objective categories used by auditors to calculate income, growth and other matters, and the apparently clear division of labour between consultants and accountants were open to strategic reinterpretation after all.

There are many international examples too, some of which reveal even more bizarre notions of ownership. In simple terms, some banking scandals have uncovered the strange world of foreign currency dealing, for example. Banks began by acquiring some foreign currency to help their industrial clients trade with foreign countries, but they soon realised that the rates of exchange of those currencies were likely to change from month to month – one month a single British pound would cost $1.56, and the next month $1.60, say. Clearly it made sense to buy in some sterling when it was cheap and keep it in stock. From here it is but a short step to more adventurous types of speculation – if you can buy sterling while it is cheap, you can supply your own customers and make lots of money selling any surplus stocks to others when the price of sterling rises again. If I have understood this correctly, what the banks then began to do was to buy foreign currency 'futures', where you reserve the right to buy certain amounts of money at some time in the future, gambling, in effect, on the price being higher when you actually come to own the currency and can sell it. If one deal loses money, there are deals stretching into the future that might pay off overall. Banks only get into difficulties when a series of gambles fail to pay off, and debts mount. Creditors can panic and demand payment immediately, instead of