

Introducing Key Themes

Overview

This chapter introduces some of the main ways in which the relations between society and nature have been understood. It is a trailer for the rest of the book, introducing themes and ideas that will be much developed later. Particular attention is given here to the four lenses outlined earlier (evolution, industry, community and risk).

The application of evolutionary ideas to human society has not only been widespread, but also highly influential. Yet in many ways it has been problematic. Later in this book, we will look at evolutionary ideas that stem from modern biology. These are more helpful than the evolutionary ideas developed by social scientists. Industry is essential to our concerns, because it is industry which transforms the natural world into the things we consume. 'Community' can actually mean a number of things. It broadly refers to human association, but it can also have other connotations such as association in particular localities. Especially important to our concerns is the extension of community to include humanity's relations with the environment. Yet few people in modern industrial societies have direct, working contact with their local environment. Their concern with their environment tends to be of a different kind; they value it as something to be viewed and protected but not as something to be worked on. Risk most often refers to the unintended effects of the application of science and of industrial development to the environment. More literally, it has recently been used by some social scientists to suggest that a wholly new 'risk society' is developing. There is a vast range of activities that are risky to human beings, it is argued, this being the result of a decline in tradition and established ways of proceeding. Thus forming a relationship or getting married nowadays is a distinctly 'risky' business in a society where there are few rules governing how families are made or unmade. Getting a job is a risky business, in a society where 'a job for life' is virtually unheard of. These second types of risk are all leading to increasing individualization. To an

increasing extent, people are their own individual experts. They regularly conduct experiments, any number of which may end in disaster. This may be disaster for the environment, but, equally, it may be disaster for their private and social lives.

Contributions from Evolutionary Thought

Evolution is one obvious place from which to start. It is important to us in a number of ways. Evolutionary thought, particularly as developed by Charles Darwin (1809–92), is concerned with the relationships between organisms (including ‘man’) and their environment. Darwin and many other evolutionists have also been particularly concerned to see human beings as themselves part of nature. They have an evolutionary history like any other species. And this history must in some way throw light on human beings’ behaviour and on the ways in which humanity has slowly changed itself as it struggles for survival. Darwin himself was quite cautious about exactly what kind of light our evolutionary past throws on our behaviour. But, as we will see, Darwin’s interpreters, and indeed some evolutionists today, have not been as cautious as Darwin himself. Many would argue that they have over-emphasized the importance of our evolutionary past.

A harsh environment and the struggle for survival

Although Darwin himself did not express much concern about the relations between people and their environment, his evolutionary theories and ideas strike us as in many ways familiar today. The general picture, as articulated by Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) as well as by Darwin, is that of organisms struggling for survival under conditions of resource scarcity (see box 1.1). Evolutionary thought was therefore claiming to have uncovered a basic mechanism underlying the rise and fall of individuals and species. But note, as many authors have suggested, that the theory can be seen as very much a product of its times. (For an example, see box 2.3 on p. 64.) Important to us is the fact that both Wallace and Darwin were inspired by Malthus’s *Essay on Population*, published in the late eighteenth century. This argued, again in ways that seem familiar to us today, that population tends to rise at a much higher rate than do the resources available for its sustenance. This was the primary cause of poverty. Unless some catastrophe such as a war, mass famine or mass disease intervenes, there will simply not be enough resources to go around.

Darwin himself admitted that Malthus’s ideas were the part of the jigsaw which brought his theory together. The harsh limitations of the environment themselves make people develop and behave differently. Shortages might mean that people have fewer children or, equally, they might lead to governments stepping in and providing resources for those unable to thrive in the struggle for survival. Note, however, the views of Wallace, co-discoverer with Darwin of the theory of natural selection. Like Darwin, he stressed that Malthus had been important to the

Box 1.1 Darwin and Wallace's theory of natural selection

Most living creatures produce many more offspring than are needed to reproduce their numbers. Yet, despite this, the number of any one species tends to remain much the same from one generation to the next. A struggle for survival and reproduction into future generations is taking place within the context of limited resources. No two individuals are alike, all show variations in some form or other. These variations are random. Those variations which give advantages for full development and reproduction of future generations will tend to prevail. Those individuals without these characteristics will fail.

Charles Darwin, c.1875

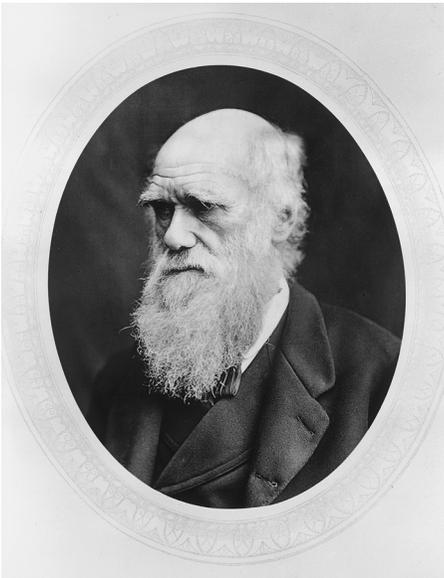
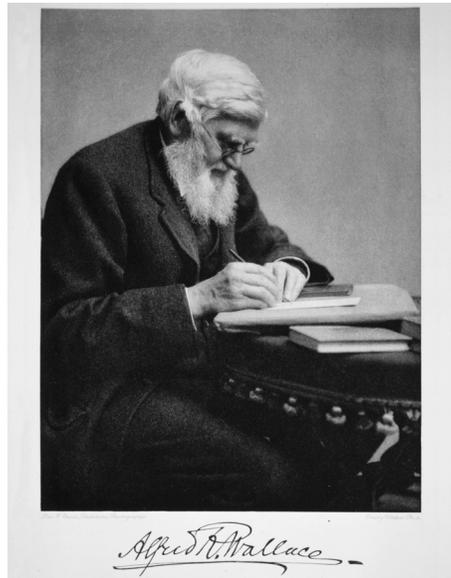


Photo AKG London

Alfred Russel Wallace



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creation of the theory. On the other hand, Wallace had a socialist background. He also felt that resources are not inevitably in short supply; they only become so because of the fact that they are in private ownership. (Wallace was an active proponent of the public ownership of land.) So he had real reservations about the idea that environmental shortages and limitations are inevitable. To him, these problems were, to a large degree at least, 'man-made'.

Darwin's theory, and his understanding of resource shortages, is controversial when applied to human beings. Similar controversies continue today. Is it right to believe that resources are inevitably dwindling in our society? To talk about dwindling misses the point when private property is the cause of such scarcities.

Applying evolutionary ideas to human society

Further controversies surround Darwin's theory when it is applied to human nature and the idea that those with special mental and physical characteristics survive into future generations. The controversy became particularly heated when social scientists applied Darwinism to human society. Wallace once asked Darwin whether he was thinking of extending his theory of natural selection to the human race. Darwin replied:

You ask whether I shall discuss 'man'. I think I shall avoid the whole subject, as so surrounded with prejudices; though I fully admit it is the highest and most interesting problem for the naturalist. (Cited in Hawkins 1997: 20)

Evolution and the emergence of the best people

Before continuing with Darwin, it is worth considering how his ideas were translated into human society by some social scientists. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), a leading sociologist of his day, actually coined the term 'the survival of the fittest' some ten years before Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. He also developed his own version of evolutionary thought before Darwin, one that argued that human beings struggle for survival. As box 1.2 shows, he even developed his own understanding of social evolution.

Of particular relevance to us, however, was Spencer's conviction that, in the struggle for survival, it is the weakest *humans* who die out and it is the strongest who survive and reproduce into future generations. And, in terms which also strike many of us as familiar today, it is the weakest *races* that are most likely to die out:

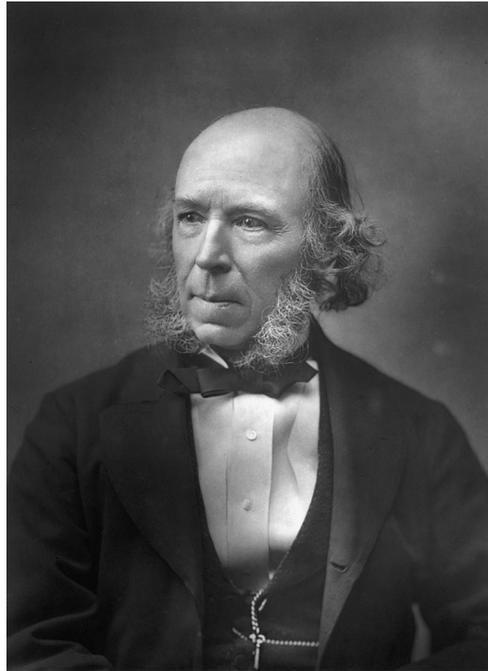
The average vigour of any race would be diminished did the diseased and feeble habitually survive and propagate; and . . . the destruction of such, through failure to fulfil some of the conditions to life leaves behind those who are able to fulfil the conditions of life, and thus keeps up the average fitness to the conditions of life. (Spencer 1898: 532–3)

The human struggle for survival inevitably leads, then, to the rise and rise of superior kinds of people, according to Spencer. And they will propagate their

Box 1.2 Herbert Spencer's theory of social evolution

Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theory owed as much to physics as to biology. He envisaged the whole of the universe as in a state of constant flux, claiming a general tendency, one which extended across the physical, biological and social worlds, for a transition from unstructured homogeneous forms towards structured homogeneous forms.

Herbert Spencer, 1888



Mary Evans Picture Library

In the case of organic nature, for example, he argued that organisms are constantly struggling to survive and, in attempting to survive in a hostile environment, they become increasingly differentiated and composed of connected parts. The transition over time from amoeba-like organisms to complex yet structured organisms is paralleled in the social world by the transition from 'simple' homogeneous societies to far more complex, heterogeneous and differentiated societies such as our own. Spencer argued that the tendency was for simple societies to be increasingly integrated with one another, albeit with powerful central leaderships. He also argued that there was a more recent tendency towards a transition from 'militant' to 'industrial' societies. The former are characterized by the extreme centralization of power, with people compelled and disciplined into supporting such power. Industrial societies are characterized, he believed, by the decentralization of power, by democracy and with governments working to support the individual.

Note that Spencer saw social evolution as linear. It has a definite direction with one kind of society evolving into another. The implication is that this is both a universal and an irreversible sequence. Spencer broadly approved of what he saw as this long period of social evolution. Its great benefit, he believed, lay in the increased realization of individual liberty. On the other hand, with the rise of state intervention and the growing number of military employed by the British government, he detected the unwelcome return of older 'militant' forms of society. Overall, however, he saw social evolution as bringing social *progress*. Partly because of this, Spencer's evolutionary ideas were even more influential than those of Darwin in the Victorian era.

Box 1.3 No gain without pain: William Sumner on hardship and the emergence of superior people in the struggle for survival

William Sumner (1840–1910), Professor of Political Economy at Yale, greatly approved of Spencer's perspective and is often seen as the main American proponent of Social Darwinism. Humans, like all other species, are struggling for survival. Intense hardships would be endured in the human struggle for survival. But, he said:

we cannot blame our fellow-men for our share of these. My neighbour and I are both struggling to free ourselves from these ills. The fact that my neighbour has succeeded in this struggle better than I constitutes no grievance for me. (Cited in Hofstadter 1959: 56)

The implication, directly stated by this follower of Darwin, was that the richest and most successful people have become richer as a result of their superior characteristics. This is again a question of the laws of nature working themselves out in human society. The best will rise to the top. Furthermore, this should not be regretted or reversed. The best rising to the top leads in the long run to social betterment.

characteristics into future generations. Society is thereby seen as steadily changing itself for the better as competition for scarce resources continues. And this view led to a particular perspective on how society *should* be organized, one that is, again, familiar today. For Spencer, the implication was that governments should stand back. While he approved of charitable activity and gifts to the poor, major government interventions in the form of, for example, extensive health or education services could only serve to hold back the processes of human evolution. It would no longer be the best who survived and reproduced future generations; social progress would not be made. This was a philosophy that was well received in the United States of America. Human society is itself part of nature (see box 1.3). The best rise to the top as a result of their inherited biological and mental characteristics; the weakest are meanwhile eliminated. These processes are beneficial in the long run since they can only strengthen civilization as a whole.

Problems of 'progress', 'direction' and 'purpose' in evolution

Spencer's theory brings us to three more general ways in which the application of evolutionary ideas to the understanding of human society has been made. Since the days of the Enlightenment they have been extraordinarily influential in their effect on the social sciences and on popular opinion. At the same time they are increasingly seen as problematic.

The essence of Darwin's theory was that evolution is random. It should not be possible to say that any stage of evolution is 'better' than any other. Similarly, the theory implies that there is no direction to evolution, social or otherwise.

Furthermore, there was no inevitable end to which evolutionary processes were developing. Again, evolution is random. There is no end result which was built into the start of the evolutionary process. Rejection of religious accounts of how humans and other species have developed on earth should imply that there was actually no purpose, direction or God-given end to which either nature or society is evolving. But evolutionary thought, whether that expressed by Darwin or by writers such as Spencer, found it difficult to completely overthrow these notions. Here again, evolutionary ideas, particularly as they developed in the early days, were a reflection of the society in which they were created.

Progress As Darwin himself admitted, it is difficult to avoid the idea that the emergence of humanity (or ‘the Descent of Man’) in the long evolutionary process does indeed represent some kind of progress over the very basic kinds of organism with which evolution started. (Hands up those who would say humanity is not progress beyond amoeba!) Furthermore, if we believe that fully evolved human beings are capable of producing increasingly rational, scientific understandings of the world, then progress becomes equated with ‘science’; including, of course, evolutionary science. Here again we find dominant nineteenth and indeed eighteenth-century values penetrating what might seem relatively objective accounts of the world. ‘Science’ is the way human beings understand nature. It uncovers the mechanisms on which humanity works to improve themselves. Humans are not just developing an understanding of nature through science, they are actively developing themselves in developing their understanding of the surrounding environment.

Furthermore, this is progressive. Greater scientific understanding entails greater realization of human capacities. Humanity is in effect improving itself as it works on revealing nature’s secrets. Science, seen in this positive light, therefore has to be a progressive and good thing. Science, and evolutionary science in particular, is often considered to have replaced religion and God as an explanation of the world. But it can also be seen, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, as a God-substitute, a largely untouchable item in which humanity should keep faith. In the light of the number of forests felled, the number of species wiped out and the number of seas polluted in the name of ‘progress’, there are now growing arguments against this view. We will return to these shortly, but note, in boxes 1.2 and 1.3 and in the following chapter, examples of ‘progress’ being built into earlier theories of social change.

Direction As regards direction, it has again been difficult for many social scientists to avoid making the assumption that there is a definite way in which both nature and society are developing. The evolutionary process, for example, seems to be producing ever more complex kinds of animal. Similarly, society (with its shift away from very simple tribal societies based on increasingly complex divisions of labour) seems to be on a general path away from one kind of society to another. Furthermore, applying evolutionary ideas to human societies can easily suggest that *all* societies are destined to develop in the same direction. There is, therefore, a definite evolutionary line (from simple to complex societies via feudalism) down which all societies must develop. The proposition sounds quite doubtful, even mystical. The implication is that what we call ‘advanced’ Western-style capitalist

democracy is the 'end' towards which all societies must be developing (note the examples in boxes 1.2 and 1.3).

Purpose Linked to questions of progress and science is the idea of a predetermined end state to which evolution is leading (this is known as a 'teleological' explanation). Again, Darwin would have strongly resisted such an idea. But, as applied by many social theorists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to human society, the tacit assumption is that humanity has reached an end point to which social evolution had all along been developing. In a way similar to a seed developing into a plant, the end result was always potentially present, potential in the origins and waiting to be realized (see, for example, box 1.3). Again, one assumption easy to make in transferring the idea of evolution to human society is that the 'end' to which Western societies have been evolving was pre-set, and indeed it is pre-set for other societies still evolving. Western capitalist democracy is not only the end towards which all societies are tending, but it is also an end which finally fulfils the purpose for which humanity was created.

Human nature, sexual selection and the inheritance of acquired characteristics

Such are some of the ways in which evolutionary thought has been extended to the study of human society. They are, as suggested, quite problematic. The connection is largely based on apparent similarities and metaphors. But note that Darwin himself was much more cautious about these controversial matters. Furthermore, he was keen to explore other sources of evolution besides natural selection. This caution and openness to a number of processes underlying evolution is a warning to social scientists and others in our own day who remain committed to simple and single types of explanation.

Darwin had little time for analogies of the kind suggested by Spencer. As regards people, he certainly insisted that human beings are a natural sort, they had 'descended' from some other ape-like species and have an evolutionary inheritance which still affects their behaviour today. Furthermore, he recognized that human beings' distinctive capacities for reasoning and for communicating complex ideas led to their triumph over other species. On the other hand, he stressed that 'struggling for survival' does not necessarily entail outright competition between individuals. One significant feature of human beings, he believed, was altruism: their capacity to think and act on behalf of other human beings. Those who possessed this capacity for sympathy might do much to protect the tribe of which they were a part. Using evolutionary thought, Darwin argued that the capacity for thinking about other people might be useful in the struggle for survival.

The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind . . . The senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason etc., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition in the lower animals. (1901: 13)

Furthermore, although Darwin's work on 'races' certainly betrays some of the influences of his day, he actually declared himself 'baffled' in accounting for 'the differences between the races of man' (ibid.). And this led him, especially in thinking about human beings, to modifications of evolutionary thought. The first such development is known as 'sexual selection'. In all animals, he believed, some physical forms and behaviours could be best explained as courtship displays and the exhibition of physical features which attract the opposite sex. If it is intelligence and muscular power in human beings that attract the opposite sex, then these attributes are likely to continue to be prominent in humanity. This is linked to an even earlier feature of evolutionary thought in biology, one which is no longer mainstream, even though it still finds minority support amongst some biologists. Darwin relied on what is known as a 'Lamarckian' understanding of human evolution, one named after an earlier nineteenth-century biologist. The idea is that it is possible for one generation to inherit the capacities which have been developed by a previous generation. It is now finding some limited application in modern biology (see box 1.4).

**Box 1.4 Evolutionary thought after Darwin:
the wisdom of the genes and the possibility of
acquired characteristics being inherited after all**

'Lamarckism' is associated with the idea that offspring can inherit the acquired characteristics of their parents. The blacksmith's child inheriting the blacksmith's muscles is the example usually given, but Darwin also attributed some of the differences between humans' developing mental capacities in attempting to overcome his 'bafflement' over human differences. Lamarckism is nowadays given little attention by mainstream evolutionary thought. On the other hand, there are some biologists who do claim that acquired immunity to diseases can indeed be passed on to later generations (Steele et al. 1998).

Another recent development in evolutionary thought looks similar to Lamarckism, but it is actually quite different. Wills (1989) refers to 'the wisdom of the genes'. This refers to the fact that humans and other animals have a genetic constitution which is not always realized. But when organisms encounter environmental or social 'shocks' they are able to realize a genetically-based potential which they had acquired during their long evolutionary history but had so far had no cause to use. All organisms are 'robust' in this sense, humans perhaps more so than other animals. This argument may look 'teleological' in that the argument may seem to be suggesting they are finally realizing potentials which they have long had. But evolution, according to this picture, still remains a largely arbitrary process.

These are two still controversial areas of evolutionary biology. They suggest, however, that, although the theory of natural selection as originally set out by Darwin and Wallace is now widely accepted, there may still be evolutionary processes at work which would help in the development of the theory.

Evolutionary thought and the social sciences: the debates continue

We will return to Darwin and evolutionary thought, particularly in terms of so-called ‘evolutionary psychology’, the relation between biological and social evolution, people’s health and the general question of ‘human nature’. But we should note here two issues pertaining to contemporary applications of evolutionary thought to the study of society and nature.

First, as regards biologically-based understandings of human behaviour, social scientists will note with some alarm that these accounts give little significance to the institutions and power relations which are the concerns of social theorists. Biologically-based accounts give undue prominence to the evolved or acquired characteristics of individuals. They reduce understanding to biological mechanisms. Little is heard here of the social relations and processes in which individuals are inevitably caught up. Evolutionary thought on its own is unlikely to be adequate as regards understanding the complex relations between society and nature. However we use such ideas, they will need combining with a concern for social and power relations.

Second, there is a continuing influence of functionalism on the study of human social structure. A strong theme in social theory, one going back at least as far as Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim, is to envisage human society as like a biological organism. It is closely allied to ‘functionalism’ in social theory, a view which envisages society as a system of collected parts, each connected to and supported by the others. These parts are capable of adaptation and they modify themselves. They do this in such a way as to ensure that society has the necessary natural resources, is able to reproduce itself and holds together in a relatively stable way. One of the most influential examples of functionalism is that adopted by Durkheim (1954). Religion, he argued, holds society together, to ensure its continuing structure and reproduction. Others have argued that the changing form of the family (from the extended family to the small independent family) functioned to support changing forms of industry. Smaller families are more mobile and hence able to fit in with industry’s needs.

Functionalism, and its emphasis on society as a connected organism-like system serving certain underlying needs, is still a feature of social and political thought today. An example is Niklas Luhmann’s recent use of this strategy in examining ‘ecological communication’. He argued that the structure of modern society, its division into many separate units, has been important in decentralizing power, but that it is dysfunctional in the sense that there are no ways in which societies can be steered in a mutually agreed direction (see box 1.5). Perhaps the application of biological analogies to human society throws up new questions and helps to build up new theories. Nevertheless, analogies between biological and social structures seem to have had their day.

Box 1.5 A biological metaphor today: the problem of 'ecological communication'

Luhmann (1989) has roots in the functionalist tradition. By this is meant that he continued to envisage society as an interconnected set of parts, analogous to a biological organism. One question arising for him was whether the particular kind of social structure we have inherited does or does not encourage environmental sustainability.

Luhmann believes it did not. It undermines 'ecological communication'. He argues that the structure of contemporary society is such that it is divided into relatively *separate* parts. It is constituted by an array of relatively independent and 'self-referential' sub-systems: the economy, science, the law, the political system. This is beneficial insofar as people are not controlled by some hierarchical and overweening system of power. But it is also socially and environmentally dangerous, Luhmann argues, because it means that contemporary society is drifting. There is no centralized and controlling system which can 'steer' society in a direction which is environmentally sustainable.

This application of the biological and functionalist idea to social-cum-environmental questions points to some real problems of management and control. It is questionable, however, whether the biological metaphor remains helpful in terms of explanation and political policy.

The Decline of 'Community'?

One of the big themes in social theory is 'community'. More particularly, for those early social scientists, living in a period which saw the arrival of industrial capitalism and momentous social change, the big concern was with the decline of community and its possible renewal. The concept is broad and amorphous. It can be unpacked to mean four quite distinct things (Bell and Newby 1976):

- it can simply be used in a commonsense topographical way, referring to a particular place;
- it can refer to a degree of social engagement in a locality;
- it can allude to 'communion', a sense of association based on personal ties, family and kinship links;
- it can be used in a confusing and ideological fashion, one in which a 'community' is asserted by dominant institutions (such as the European Community) but which has little meaning to most people's everyday life.

All these definitions and distinctions have been conflated. They are worth separating out, however. The 'decline' of community can be used to refer to all four of these subdefinitions. It is rarely, however, extended to our association with biological connectedness and relations between humans and the non-human world. An exception can be found in the work of Ferdinand Tönnies (see box 1.6).

Box 1.6 Ferdinand Tönnies on social evolution and community

Social transformation entails not only the separation of people one from another (including members of their own families); it also entails the separation of people from the environment on which they depend. Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) was one of the few sociologists sensitive to both such forms of separation and to the relations between them. His picture of community and its breakdown would probably appeal to many environmental activists.

He made the famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (1887). The former is seen as the old and traditional order, albeit one which still exists in many societies in the modern era. Under *Gemeinschaft*, people are bound into an intimately shared order. Kin, family and neighbours work together, experiencing the common joys and sorrows of regular association within a shared, known and familiar territory. People work and live on the basis of shared values and a shared view of authority. This sense of communality is promoted through living in localities which are not only shared but which have been tended and passed down by past generations and which will be inherited by future kin and friends.

Tönnies argued, in a way unusual amongst social scientists, that human beings are themselves a kind of animal. They have, for example, a well-developed capacity for enjoying a sense of communion or association with other people and with the natural world. Also important to them is memory, learning values from others and incorporating them into their own beliefs.

Gemeinschaft, or early forms of community, fulfils these human needs well. It satisfies people's emotional needs. The same cannot be said of *Gesellschaft* or modern society, one which is seen by Tönnies as largely artificial and imposed on human nature. Impersonality, competition and individualism are seen as thriving under *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies nevertheless hoped that new forms of collective relations (including new forms of management techniques and emergent kinds of social security) might eventually help to recover older forms of community existence. But of particular interest to us in this picture is the relation between society and nature. Living on the same land, ploughing it, domesticating animals, handing down the land from father to son are all an integral part of *Gemeinschaft* and these relationships and processes are lost under *Gesellschaft*.

Tönnies was writing of links with nature under *Gemeinschaft* which were not only direct but which, it was assumed, people had the responsibility to maintain for the sake of future generations. His message is particularly relevant to today's concerns with environmental sustainability. But does it idealize early kinds of community life? There have been a number of instances in which tribal peoples have been responsible for environmental disasters. The giant Moa (an ostrich-like bird) became extinct 100 years after the arrival of the first people in New Zealand. In North America, elephants, anteaters, deer, antelopes and rodents were lost on a massive scale after people were able to cross the Bering Strait between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago. Furthermore, could such sustainability be gained without the same kind of work on the land and sense of intergenerational responsibility which remained a central feature of older forms of society? To put this another way, is it possible to imagine strong community relations (including strong relations with the land and with the natural world) in modern societies?

His account of the earliest forms of community quite deliberately includes land and blood (or kin) as constituting the kinds of close association that were being lost with the advent of modern society.

Durkheim offers a parallel picture of the transformation of human association, one which distinguishes between ‘mechanical’ and ‘organic’ solidarity (see box 1.7). His model is packed with biological and evolutionary metaphors. The idea of society ‘progressing’ in a linear way from one stage to another is one (inaccurate) interpretation of Darwin’s theory of evolution. And his picture of a transition from simple ‘mechanical’ solidarity to an ‘organic’ solidarity based on people recognizing the associations between the parts of a complex modern society is again using a biological metaphor. It is somewhat paradoxical, therefore, that he does not pay substantial attention to the environment itself and to people’s relationship with it. Nevertheless, his account (like that of Tönnies) remains very useful. He is also describing the transformation of *human* nature which he believed was accompanying the rise of modern society.

Box 1.7 Durkheim on the decline of community and the rise of individualism

Human beings have lived most of their lives in small-scale communities. Durkheim argues that much of their lives are controlled by such communities. Religion and tradition are dominant, with the individual’s life subordinated to a strong sense of collective sensibility. The will of the community therefore prevails over the individual. They are homogeneous societies, in the sense that they are characterized by low divisions of labour. Property is communal. Durkheim distinguished the kind of social solidarity in such societies as ‘mechanical’.

Now, however, as people live more in societies with high divisions of labour, the individual person is indeed treated by society as an individual. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Durkheim argued that egoism, impersonality and competition promote such individualism. Furthermore, modern society no longer presents norms, values or traditions which would help to limit people’s desires. In these circumstances, Durkheim believed, people become unhappy. Left to themselves, people have, on the one hand, an unbounded array of wants. And yet they have limited means to realize these wants. Societies in the past have imposed norms as a way of dealing with this problem. But in modern society there are no such constraints. Anything is, in theory at least, possible. The result is ‘anomie’, a condition which, at worst, can lead to suicide.

All this brings considerable difficulties in maintaining a sense of community, at least in its old form. This new kind of society is termed ‘organic’ by Durkheim. It is analogous to a more advanced organism, one composed of a number of interconnected specialist parts. This kind of society is also based on private property and the division of labour. And this undermines the sense of collective solidarity felt in older kinds of society. At the same time, individuals are no longer repressed and made uniform by the laws and traditions of society. People may still be living quite peacefully with one another, but solidarity is now based on recognizing the necessary interdependence between different elements of the division of labour: companies, trade associations, unions, the state, households and so on. Such recognition is difficult to sustain,

particularly given the levels of individualism and ‘anomie’ characterizing modern society. Nevertheless, Durkheim believed that a new kind of solidarity was likely to develop, one based on organic society. And sociologists as ‘scientists of society’ can do much to ensure that the new kind of society holds together, not least through education and the promotion of more collective forms of morality.

Durkheim exemplifies the themes of progress, direction and purpose in social evolution. He believed that sociology could, and should, be made into a science; one analogous to the sciences of physics and biology but one in which society could be studied as a separate entity. The methods of Enlightenment science – creating theoretical models and testing them with evidence – were appropriate to the social as well as to the physical and natural worlds. Making a new social science would bring understanding and hence ‘progress’, especially if the knowledge developed by social scientists could form part of the educative process.

Durkheim’s model, like that of Tönnies, is linear, in the sense that he was arguing that one type of society developed from the previous one. (There is, for example, no possibility of a reversion from organic to mechanical solidarity.) It arguably contains a sense of purpose or ‘teleology’. Modern society, for example, is seen as self-balancing in the same way as organisms which adapt and self-adjust so as to ensure their own survival.

Early sociologists such as Tönnies and Durkheim were therefore tracking important changes in people’s identity and forms of consciousness. Tönnies was making some very suggestive interventions as regards the changing association between society and the environment. But what might a modern social science more sensitive to environmental considerations have looked like?

Such a social science would certainly pay attention to globalization and the extension of society over space. This again has major implications for small-scale community life and human association. Transnational corporations, the global market and the mass media are all combining to make society into an international phenomenon. A stock-market crash in Japan impacts on job opportunities in Europe. An event in Middle East is known about in Britain or the USA at the same time as it is known about in, say, Israel.

Society, it can be argued, has long been organized on an international basis. Perhaps what is most important now is that the societies which were previously at the centre of empires and markets are now being subjected to the same kinds of pressure (foreign imports of goods, immigration, consumerism, armed interventions) which they previously exercised over other societies.

Globalization and the ‘disembedding’ of social life

The kinds of interpretation offered by the older, classical social theory as represented by Durkheim and Tönnies can still be useful if they are combined with an understanding of contemporary globalization. The beginnings of an intellectual project of this kind are suggested by the contemporary social scientist, Anthony Giddens (box 1.8). He argues strongly that local community life has now lost the kinds of significance it used to have. Bearing in mind the many relationships and processes impacting on our lives which have their sources far-removed from us,

Box 1.8 Society spread over time and space: anxiety and the 'disembedding' of community

Modern society is becoming 'disembedded', to use a word adopted by Giddens and others. Human interaction in small-scale settings obviously still takes place but, in the context of globalized trade and communications, it does not have the same meaning or significance it once had. Many of the important institutions and processes affecting our everyday lives and interaction are located well beyond our community. This leads, Giddens and others believe, to a new form of human anxiety (one they term 'ontological insecurity') in which everyday life has lost much of its meaning. The interactions we have with one another are still important to us, but they have a decreasing significance in terms of the processes and institutions actually affecting our lives.

day-to-day interaction is left relatively empty. This has profound, even disturbing, implications for human identity.

But in contemporary society, humanity is separated from external nature as well as from its own species. In this respect, too, most people are being disengaged from immediate, sensuous engagement with the materials provided by nature which we need for survival. Food and raw materials now often travel thousands of miles to the place where they are finally consumed. At the same time, inputs to farming processes, such as phosphates and manure, are also transported around the globe rather than made and used locally. People have little direct understanding of the inputs to economic activity and consumption. The same applies to outputs. We also have little direct experience of what happens to the so-called waste products of our lives – these too are intangible, often affecting people far distant from ourselves. These kinds of detachment have been assisted by new technologies. Our understanding of ecological systems, of the way things grow, and indeed of the seasons, has been supplanted by new refrigeration techniques, by vast greenhouses and by the transportation of goods on a global scale.

Disengagement therefore extends to humanity's separation from the very environment which we inhabit. Arguably, this very separation and the lack of understanding it brings are important, largely unexplored, factors lying behind contemporary 'food scares'. Most food is actually quite safe to eat, and environmental crises are nothing like as threatening as is often maintained. Perhaps a central worry now concerns not only the real problems that stem from misuse of the environment, but also from the fact that most of us simply fail to understand the nature of the environment, the nature of the ecological systems of which we are a part. All this leads to further profound psychological disorientation. Knowledge of 'food', for example, is reduced to understanding gleaned from indecipherable additive numbers on packets in supermarkets and making uninformed judgements about the alternatives. At one level knowledge has never been so complete. The problem is to know what to do about it. The result (as box 4.1 point 2 illustrates – see pp. 120–1) is stunned confusion in the supermarket aisle.

Knowledge based on direct experience has given way to knowledge created by scientists (what Giddens calls 'abstract systems') in laboratories. Distrust of them, their apparently frequent changes of mind and of the impact of vested interests on

knowledge is a key result. But so too is failure of confidence in our own, relatively unscientific, knowledge and our own abilities for critical engagement.

But, before we become completely mired in gloom, note the contemporary and ongoing attempts to re-engage with the environment. We must remain alive to continuing attempts at self-determination and the *re*-establishment of personal relations and direct relations with external nature. These are attempts to restore older (or what are assumed to be older) forms of social relation. Here, for example, is an interpretation of the contemporary allotment garden. It is one example of how the development of a new kind of self has been envisaged, one actively engaged in directly relating not only to the environment but also to other people.

It is possible to buy a packet of frozen food and cook it instantly without knowing where or how or by whom it was produced. And this is less expensive than seeding, nurturing and harvesting the food yourself. Why, then, does the allotment garden continue to flourish? The answer must lie in its image, in the role of communal effort, in the feelings growers have in feeding a family through their own efforts. Our image of the allotment turns out to be not a matter of the way we glimpse its landscape from the train but a reflection of our image of the world as a whole and the social relationships we make in our small part of it. (Crouch and Ward 1988: 14)

The allotment is, therefore, one attempt to regain a sense of community and personal identity through interacting directly with people and nature. Note that the form of such interaction entails a reassessment of the way *production* is organized.

Industry and Production

It is sometimes said that we now live in a ‘consumer society’. It is argued that the main way in which social relations, forms of status and human identities are now formed is in the sphere of consumption. Thus, what people buy (hence eat, drive, live in, dress in) has replaced other factors such as work and class in the way they think about themselves and their relations to others. People are, in effect, what they buy, consumption realizing the Enlightenment ideal of individual fulfilment.

This argument receives wide support. It has something to recommend it and we will return to it in chapter 4. But it is important to be cautious at this point. First, in Western societies, ‘consumption’ means rather different things to different people. Consumption, and the idea of making identities and relations through consumption, perhaps has a particular significance for the middle classes and for wealthy people – those with high levels of disposable income. But even amongst the middle classes, consumption is an important way by which one group can distinguish itself from another. Academics, for example, are prone to conspicuously underconsume, thereby distancing themselves from more affluent people and, in particular, from the values of these more affluent people. Other relatively wealthy people may engage in forms of consumption which appear to resist the mainstream. Green consumerism is an important case in point. In this case, relationships and forms of identity are made through, say, the consumption of organic foods or purchases made at the Body Shop. But, meanwhile, less wealthy people might well be

wondering whether they are even part of contemporary ‘consumer culture’. Many poor people in Western societies would still not really feel themselves part of this culture, though they may well aspire to it.

Again, we will return to these matters in more detail later. They are important for two reasons. First, new ‘Western’ lifestyles are having significant, sometimes disastrous, effects on people’s health. Second, new kinds of identity based on consumption would seem to have implications for environmental sustainability. But the main point to be made here is that these arguments about a new kind of society based on consumption systematically fail to recognize the continuing importance of industry or production. Someone, somewhere, must still be *making* all these commodities which the more affluent people are consuming. This suggests that the idea of a ‘consumer society’ is simplistic and somewhat premature. It is perhaps an idea particularly linked with an emergent ‘Western’ way of life. But in so doing, it fails to recognize the broader, global picture (see box 1.9).

Box 1.9 Production and consumption: making the links

Dependent societies have always been subject to the changing consumption habits of dominant nations. A fashion for calico in eighteenth-century Europe, for example, led many Indian peasants to stop growing food and take up growing, or weaving, cotton. Many of these peasants starved when the fashion for calico changed. Nowadays, there is considerable awareness of these global connections. Before the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, delegates from developing countries asked for consumption in Western societies to be placed on the agenda for debate. This was partly because high levels of consumption and, as a result, high levels of *production* in the West are seen by many as the underlying cause of, for example, global warming, the thinning of the ozone layer and many other kinds of environmental degradation. But also, like the eighteenth-century Indian peasants, the delegates from third world societies did not want to be dependent on rapid shifts in patterns of consumption in the first world (Miller 1995).

In the end a compromise was reached in setting the conference agenda. It was agreed that the subject of levels and forms of consumption would not be raised by third world delegates if those from the first world did not raise the issue of population control. Nevertheless, as the following press-cutting shows, the underlying importance of considering Western industrialization remains:

Revealed: How the Smoke Stacks of America have Brought the World’s Worst Drought to Millions of Africans

To those who live there, it is as if the rich have stolen the rain. For more than 30 years, the Sahel region of Africa has suffered the longest sustained droughts in the world. In some places, rainfall has fallen by between 20 and 50 per cent. As a consequence, crops have failed on a huge scale; in the worst years, between 1972 and 1975 and between 1984 and 1985 up to a million people have starved to death.

New research indicates that pollution from factories and power stations, especially in North America and Europe, have exacerbated drought in countries South of the Sahara. (*Independent*, 13 June 2002)

It is, to say the least, a pity if industry and production do not figure in social sciences' understanding of the environment. There is now considerable debate over the role of industry in affecting social change; the central question being 'is capitalism consistent with environmental sustainability?'

Competing scenarios of industry and the environment

(1) Business as usual: industry as the solution There are those who remain fairly relaxed about the relation between industry and the environment. According to this view, industry is not the bogeyman which it is often made out to be. Power lies in the hands (or pockets) of the consumer. If consumer demands change (if, say, there is massive demand for electric cars), then firms will compete with one another to satisfy them. Those companies that fail to meet the changing demands will simply go to the wall. Those on the political Left have the picture entirely the wrong way round, goes the thinking. It is not industry which is in charge, but masses of individuals attempting to meet their needs. Industry, tied to the buying and selling of goods in the marketplace, itself operates rather like an ecological system, adapting itself to the signals generated by the costs people are prepared to pay.

The same applies to the resources which form inputs to production systems. As one set of resources becomes scarce, it will become more expensive. Industry needs to avoid such extra expense, so it will turn to other cheaper resources. Silicon, used in the making of electronic chips, is often given as an example. It is no accident, according to this perspective, that new forms of industry are based on silicon chips. Sand is available in vast supply. Again, industry will create new products once the nature and extent of global environmental change becomes clear. There is no need for heavy-handed state intervention, the market being the best means of coping with heatwaves, droughts, floods and famines as and when they occur. As one pro-market commentator puts it, 'Adaptation to climate change, when it happens, is undoubtedly the most rational course, for a number of reasons. Most countries will be richer then, and so better able to afford to build sea walls or develop drought resistant plants' (*The Economist*, cited in Foster 2002: 65). The main role for governments is to ensure and enhance the principle of private property-ownership. This allows for enhanced economic growth and accurate price signals to be made to the owners of industry regarding the availability of resources.

In an echo of the Enlightenment arguments encountered earlier, private ownership is also sometimes seen as the solution to environmental problems. If, for example, there was a real and sustained demand for rhinoburgers, then the owners and breeders of rhinos would make sure that this species did not become extinct. Environmentalists often say they would like to maintain a diversity of species. But are they prepared to pay for the survival of these species? The best way forward is via the market (see box 1.10). There have been a number of objections to this position. Perhaps chief amongst them is the argument made by many environmentalists that the value of the environment cannot be simply equated with the valuation it may acquire during a market transaction. According to this position, reducing value to market value is a moral crime. Owning and selling buffalo,

Box 1.10 Consumption as directing industry: the case of animal consumption

Peter Saunders is one of the most active proponents of the promotion of consumption as a means of ensuring that species survive. This entails making rare breeds into commodities. As regards industry, consumers are dominant. Producers (such as producers of rhinoburgers) are seen as simply responding to consumer-demand:

When resources have a market value and can be bought and sold as private property, they tend not to disappear, for owners then have an interest in maintaining and reproducing them. It is this that explains why free-roaming American buffalo was wiped out while cows graze on the same land today in their thousands, or why crocodiles (which governments allow to be farmed for their skins) are in plentiful supply while rhinoceroses (which roam free in reserves and are poached for their horns) are on the endangered species list. (1995: 70)

crocodiles, rhinos and other endangered species have all the morality of selling your grandmother to the highest bidder. But, for some, the criticism goes even further than this: the real problems start not with the exchange of commodities for money, but in the *production* of commodities. Furthermore, those who believe this remain unrelaxed about the wait-and-see pro-market philosophy.

(2) **Capitalism as the problem** Second, there is the radically opposite position. This argues that an adequate understanding of environmental degradation must recognize that it is capitalist industry which is the key culprit. This is the dominant force in the land, not only generating ecological crises but actively moulding consumer demand. Consumers, therefore, are actually not in charge. Their tastes, and their demands of industry, are shaped by industry itself. Advertising and the manufacturing of false needs has a key role to play in the creation of these needs. According to this perspective, the record of recent history shows that capitalist industry ruthlessly undermines and wrecks the environment on which it depends. The costs of such destruction are borne by the whole of society, including those dependent on welfare. Furthermore, industry wrecks human nature, undermining the health of its workers and not paying the full costs of the damage it causes (see box 1.11).

Waiting for industry to appreciate its self-destructive tendencies and adapt is a hazardous undertaking. Many people, animals, resources and ecosystems will meanwhile have been wasted. Some forms of environmental change, such as global warming, may well be irreversible. What is to be done? Governments, if they are no longer in a position to own and control industry, must take extensive powers to regulate it. Such regulation is not only in the interest of people and 'resources' but in the interest of industry itself. 'Industry', after all, is only a set of largely unrelated firms interested in making a profit. Government intervention needs to save industry from itself; from, that is, collapse due to its own short-sightedness. But few on the political Left would nowadays suggest that extensive central government intervention or ownership is the answer. They would also point to forms

Box 1.11 The second contradiction of capitalism

James O'Connor is the leading proponent of the theory of the 'second contradiction of capitalism'. He bases his arguments on a reading of Marx. The 'first' contradiction in Marx's work is that for which he is best known: the conflict between capital and labour and a range of crises stemming from that conflict which, Marx believed, threaten to overthrow capitalist society as a whole. The 'second' contradiction was not given a great deal of prominence by Marx, but it seems particularly relevant in our own era. It consists of the tendency of capitalism to ruin the natural conditions of its own survival. These include the resources it needs and the health and well-being of its workers. O'Connor locates the second contradiction in our own era in the following way – note that 'socialized reproduction of laborpower' refers to the various ways in which the capacity of people to work is constantly reproduced in the home, in schools, in the health service and so on:

Global capitalist development since WWII would have been impossible without deforestation, air and water pollution, pollution of the atmosphere, global warming and the other ecological disasters; without the construction of megacities, with no regard for congestion, rational land use and transport systems, and housing and rents; and finally, without the reckless disregard for community and family health, physical and emotional, education and other 'components' of the socialized reproduction of laborpower – not to speak of the welfare of future generations. If global capital had bothered to reproduce or restore the conditions of production as these presented themselves at the end of the post-WWII reconstruction period, world GNP growth probably would have been no more than one-half recorded rates, perhaps only one quarter of recorded rates. (O'Connor 1988: 10)

of collective ownership and control at a local level, forms which are largely the result of spontaneous actions by people with little or no support from governments. We will later meet some examples of these industries which are owned and controlled by the people who work in them.

What are the difficulties with this position? Most obviously, this emphasis on industry can be seen as neglecting the role of consumption. Marxists, like many other environmentalists, would point to excessive consumption as a major contributor to environmental problems. But they would point to an industry-driven form of over-consumption. In other words, it is industry, with the aid of carefully planned mass advertising, which tries to convince the population that it needs to consume in order to find satisfaction. Over-consumption, and aspirations to consume even more, can therefore largely be attributed to the powers of capitalist production. But note also that many today would not wish to limit 'work' to industrial work alone. Domestic work, with women still making the greatest contribution, can also entail interaction with the external environment. Marxism has been lax in recognizing the importance of this kind of work and interaction.

(3) 'Ecological modernization' A final position comes between the above two. 'Ecological modernization' suggests that contemporary society can be made

Box 1.12 'Ecological modernization': a South-East Asia case-study

The German sociologist, Joseph Huber, invented the idea of 'ecological modernization' in the 1980s. As he wrote in 1985: 'the dirty and ugly industrial caterpillar transforms into an ecological butterfly' (cited in Spaargaren and Mol 1992: 334). Production – incorporating new forms of technology – is linked to other forms of restructuring (including transformation in forms of consumption and new government practices) in a more environmentally sustainable direction.

The 'ecological modernization' thesis has led to a number of case-studies. One of these concerns pulp and paper manufacturing in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. It argues that ecological modernization is indeed proceeding. Modifications to old and new pulp mills are extensive, leaving them 'amongst the most efficient in the world'. New mills in South-East Asia 'show remarkable achievements in the reduction of the amount of water used per ton of pulp produced'. On the other hand, ecological modernization is uneven. It is well advanced in large-scale, export-oriented and modern parts of the economy in this part of the developing world. It is nothing like so well advanced in small-scale enterprises aimed mainly at the domestic market (see Sonnenfeld 2000).

ecologically acceptable. There are some variations within this position, but in general it is not prepared to adopt such a 'hands-off' approach as the first perspective outlined above. To go back to our evolutionary themes, we are now witnessing another stage in the linear and progressive development of modern society. Society, it is argued, has gone through 'traditional' and 'modern' stages, the latter being linked with an industry informed by a science in which there was a good deal of public trust. We are now moving into a new period. It is one in which the consequences of modernity are being assessed. And, most importantly, the lessons of modernity (including the environmental lessons) are being built back into modernity itself. Thus, as envisaged in this scenario, there is no need to give up on the development of the modern age in the light of environmental crisis. There is certainly no need to revert to pre-industrial forms of society. Capitalism can be 'greened', even if the process is slow and uneven (see box 1.12).

In particular, there is no need to give up on science or technology simply because they have in the past led to environmental degradation. New technologies can make production processes environmentally sustainable. New kinds of more flexible government, interacting with the private sector, and in some instances handing over management to non-government agencies, are now emerging. Such new alliances are ensuring that the pessimistic, almost apocalyptic, vision, as outlined above in the second scenario, does not transpire. Non-governmental organizations, which might in the past have been quite hostile to government and business, are now included in the decision-making process in a major way. Their capacity for generating ideas and forging links between the public and private sector is seen as a formidable means by which a dynamic green capitalism is brought into being.

Box 1.13 'Ecological modernization' in Holland

Arthur Mol is one of the leading proponents of ecological modernization theory. He is optimistic about the capacity of modern capitalism to reorganize itself in ways which are environmentally sustainable (Mol 1994). The Dutch chemical industry (entailing the production of paints, plastics and pesticides) is, Mol says, already restructuring itself to deal with environmental crises. This is just one example, he argues, of how economic institutions, governments, science and technology are diverging from the way in which their predecessors focused wholly on achieving high levels of productivity. A green capitalism is therefore being developed.

Finally, ecological modernization is seen as possessed of new cultures, new ways of seeing humanity's relations with nature. So-called 'green consumerism' might be seen as one feature of this new type of modernity. But proponents of 'ecological modernization' take a much wider view of this new kind of modernity. They refer, for example, to new 'storylines', which interrogate scientific ideas and pursue them to uncover their social and political consequences (see box 1.13). In short, the great emphasis on progress via increased productivity is questioned. New ways of achieving progress are found, with new technologies and new attitudes leading the way.

What are the difficulties here? 'Ecological modernization' finds few friends either from the proponents of 'business as usual' or from those who argue that industry is almost bound to wreck the environment. For the former it is a tinkering with the market in such a way as to stop the market operating properly while allowing bureaucratic states too much influence. For the latter it contains an insufficient understanding of how capitalist societies operate and, on the basis of some successful modernization in affluent societies and some industrial sectors, draws over-optimistic conclusions for industry's relations with the environment as a whole. Too many lessons are being based on the practices and experiences of affluent societies. Holland and Germany, for example, are sufficiently affluent (and sufficiently composed of ecologically conscious middle-class people) to be able to afford and indeed demand ecological modernization. Perhaps, at the same time, they have managed to ensure that toxic and other dangers are located in other parts of the globe besides theirs. On the other hand, as we have seen, there may be evidence of this tendency spreading to less developed and less affluent societies.

These are some of the central areas of debate around the role of industry in affecting the relations between society and nature. We might note that national governments in some societies, but not yet the USA, appear to be on the point of transforming their outlook from a 'business as usual' to an 'ecological modernization' perspective. On the other hand, the popular, locally based, forms of cooperative organization outlined under scenario 2 often find support from national governments of different political persuasions. 'Self-help' often appeals both to those kinds of politics supportive of individual freedom and to those supportive of people owning and running the organizations in which they work.

A Risk Society

The notion of ecological modernization closely links up with another influential theme in contemporary social theory. It is one developed in rather different ways by two contemporary theorists, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. There are differences in their accounts, but also close overlapping similarities.

Central is the notion that we live in a new kind of society. It is one characterized by high levels of risk, new kinds of social relations and new forms of politics. Not only is this assertion influential, but it also closely links to a number of the well-established themes we have developed in this chapter. Let us take the 'risk society' hypothesis and assess it in the light of some of our earlier points.

Manufactured risk

The argument here is that society has gone through a number of stages. Note the idea of a progression between different types of society, one similar to that identified in the 'evolution' section earlier. There was, according to Beck's understanding, a 'pre-modern' stage in which risks were largely external to society. Thus drought, famine and earthquakes then just 'happened'. They certainly constituted massive hazards to human populations and people perhaps felt that, by behaving differently and perhaps praying to deities, they could influence the extent of these disasters. Nevertheless, they were not usually a direct consequence of what society had undertaken.

This has all changed under conditions of 'modernity'. Now, the intervention of science and technology creates risks which are directly made by society itself. Global warming, environmental devastation, threats to human and animal health of all kinds are now of a distinctly 'man'-made kind. Furthermore, the spread of these risks is changing. There is now a sense in which risks generated in one part of the globe (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), for example, or the generation of gases trapping heat in the atmosphere) are, as we discussed earlier, experienced by people far away from where the problem actually starts. According to this argument, there are important implications here for social stratification. In earlier forms of society the rich were able to buy themselves out of environmental threats by, for example, moving towards more healthy parts of town. Now this is no longer possible. Global threats (including threats to the food chain) are more likely to affect us all.

More generally, what earlier appeared to be wholly rational and inevitably progressive interventions based on science are no longer so unproblematic. The dark, and unanticipated, side of modern existence becomes disastrously apparent, and uncertainty makes a comeback. This, combined with a loss of faith in virtually all kinds of authority and certainty, leads, it is argued, to another kind of modernity, namely 'reflexive modernity', one in which people create their own biographies and identities, independent of class, regional origins or family circumstances. At the same time these people construct their own knowledge. Science can no longer be relied on: it now spends much of its time apologizing and clearing up the results of earlier 'scientific' interventions.

Social relations and the risk society

A related feature of the ‘risk society’ as outlined by Beck and Giddens concerns the relations between people. Taking up a theme which we have already identified in our discussion of ‘community’, the assertion is that society is increasingly constituted by autonomous individuals. We are treated as, and treat ourselves as, separate people. This makes the modern family particularly problematic. It is becoming ‘an association of individual persons who each bring to it their own interests, experiences and plans and who are each subjected to different controls, risks and constraints’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 97).

Furthermore, people are treated and indeed treat themselves as clever, proactive individuals. The opposite side to the coin of a widespread distrust of science and other forms of authority (such as governments, teachers and parents) is that each individual becomes an independent expert. This means that individuals are made into, and make themselves into, their own scientific consultants. People ask themselves why, for example, weather patterns are changing or what are the most healthy ways of living. Not only science, but also tradition has broken down as a source of guidance. Tradition, like authority, has constantly to justify itself. It, too, is up for grabs. Indeed, the Enlightenment has prided itself on dismissing tradition as a source of reference for understanding the world.

Changing forms of economy, with high levels of self-employment, constant moves by individuals between firms and high levels of individual assessment *within* firms, contribute to this individualization (see box 1.14). The idea of a lifetime career within a single firm is breaking down. Individuals are now determining their own careers, often consulting themselves as to how they should run their lives. The consumerism discussed earlier also contributes to these new kinds of social

Box 1.14 The individualization of work

Ulrich Beck argues that we are moving into a new kind of modern society, characterized by ‘the individualization of work’.

Linda’s new working life is not without its drawbacks. Chief among them is a constant cloud of anxiety about finding the next job. In some ways Linda feels isolated and vulnerable. Fearful of the stigma of having been laid off, for example, she doesn’t want her last name to appear in this article. Linda gets to build her schedule around her son’s. She gets to find her own assignments. And she gets to be a pioneer of the new work force. (*Newsweek*, 14 June 1993, cited in Beck 2000)

Such individualization at the workplace, Beck argues, combines with the individualization of life more generally. Society, he believes, ‘is in danger of falling apart’. Flows of capital continue to move around the world and the working class is split up into bodies of individual consumers. Far from resisting capitalist society, their values and priorities are caught up in supporting it.

relation. The traditional ways of classifying people (with, for example, concepts of class and gender) are no longer appropriate. We are categorized, and categorize ourselves, more by the kinds of product we purchase (and eat, drive, dress in, live in) than by our class as defined by, for example, our work position.

Nothing can be taken on trust in the 'risk society', and it is up to us as individuals to be constantly monitoring the enormous amounts of information available to us and to make our own decisions on that basis. These include our own decisions regarding the risks we are taking. Nobody, and no institution, is going finally to assure us that we are doing the 'right' thing to minimize risk, improve our own life chances or act in ways that will secure an environmentally sustainable future.

All this is simultaneously liberating and oppressive. There is much to be said for not having authority constantly breathing down our necks. On the other hand, having all courses of action as equally open can lead to a considerable sense of personal anxiety and uncertainty. This is one of the big problems of our age, one analogous to the kinds of anomie of which Durkheim originally wrote (see box 1.7 above). With no standards, norms or external advice, we are again, in the end, left in a position of insecurity.

The politics of the risk society

For both Beck and Giddens, this emergent kind of society is linked to new forms of politics. Distinctions between Left and Right are no longer relevant. They are remnants of an old kind of class society, another set of traditions which is no longer justified. If identity is largely individualized and if the whole notion of scientific 'progress' is being undermined, so too are forms of politics that are based on such assumptions. People have, according to this thesis, given up on all such forms of authority. This includes government and the large-scale, reforming projects which governments used to pursue. Instead, we look to our own, mainly *personal*, forms of politics, salvation and progress, and these include self-care. Governments (and still less government scientists) are seen as being unlikely to help us in any attempt to avoid global warming, food risks, skin cancers and so on. It is up to us individually to come up with a conclusion and to act accordingly. The same kind of individualized politics applies to life more generally. Politics is a hedonistic concern for the present, one which positively welcomes and consumes the products of corporate capitalism (see box 1.15). A recurrent theme of the environmental movement is that we should think and act on behalf of future generations. Perhaps hedonistic concern for the moment is itself a product of not knowing what the future holds. But it is difficult to see how an immediate interest in the present squares with any concern for future generations.

Central, particularly to Giddens, are 'life politics'. These are essentially about gaining control over your own life, empowering yourself in relation to your environment. Part of such empowerment is knowing yourself, becoming aware of yourself. And new scientific developments in the form of genetics and *in vitro* fertilization are becoming new means to this end. Why should this be? It is because they appear to offer an understanding of the self and, through the possible

Box 1.15 Individualized 'life politics' in the contemporary risk society

They used to want a revolution. Now they just want money.

Meet Ade, Danielle, Ryan and Lisa. They look like any other streetwise teenagers. It is 10 am and they are heading off to meet their friends for a Saturday in town. But this is no ordinary weekend – they are going to Britain's first teen lifestyle 'exhibition'.

Far from rebelling against corporate success, youngsters cannot get enough of it. Those who know them say teens cleave to consumer icons as badges of identification. 'Young teens do not use politics, religion or class to express themselves; they speak a new language – consumerism,' says Sean Pillot de Chenecey, a marketing consultant who has worked for Levi's, PlayStation, and Coca-Cola. 'They understand that products have personality and they use those products to help them see their own identity and to communicate that identity to their peers.' Forget Reclaim the Streets, Prague, Seattle and the 'No Logo' rebellion, today's teens are growing older younger and getting on with the all-consuming business of consuming. (*The Observer*, 19 November 2000)

manipulation of the body and the genetic code, further insight and even specification of the self. While these technologies and techniques bring risks, they also bring forward the possibility of new relations to, and understandings of, nature. Note here a link to our central theme. Again, the suggestion is that in better appreciating nature, we start to know ourselves better. And there is even a strong notion of purpose here, one described earlier as 'teleological'. Humanity is seen as constantly understanding itself better as it becomes more knowledgeable. The emergent forms of science (including genetics and cloning) are just further means by which we gain an insight into ourselves.

There is another element to contemporary politics as envisaged here, and one which again has links to some of the ideas reviewed earlier. For Beck in particular, there are real problems in steering modern society. In a way similar to the biological analogies adopted by some of the early Social Darwinists (see pp. 32–6), society is envisaged as increasingly fragmented into separate units. This fragmentation makes modern society very difficult to steer – it is not easy for separate units to adequately communicate with each other, and it is almost impossible for a government to attempt to direct the society for which it is responsible. It becomes increasingly difficult to envisage the idea of a government steering a society towards some 'end' or 'purpose'. Given such fragmentation, how can a society be led towards environmental sustainability, for example? This difficulty contributes to the destabilization of government authority itself. If governments cannot guide societies, what are they for? Why do they make claims and promises which they are incapable of delivering? Governments therefore join other kinds of authority and tradition as constantly needing to justify their existence.

Such are some of the key arguments of the thesis of the 'risk society'. Whether proponents of this thesis have adequately understood the phenomena they are describing is a matter to which we will return in some detail. Suffice it to say here that

much of the autonomy apparently gained by these independent, tradition-free individuals may be more apparent than real.

Summary

This chapter has introduced four core themes: evolution, community, industry and risk. These might seem like four relatively separate concepts, yet we have uncovered a number of connecting ideas that span them. These include the idea that societies are evolving in discrete stages and that ‘progress’ is being made during this evolution. This theme, and continuing problems with the notion of ‘progress’, will make a reappearance later, especially in chapter 2. Most applications of evolutionary thought to the understanding of society have tended to be of a largely metaphorical kind. Analogies are made between social and biological development which are not always helpful in understanding social change. Biological science, as such, is rarely used. Chapter 6 will address some contemporary ideas in evolutionary science and the study of disease in an attempt to understand human nature and human health. A further theme has been the collapse of community and factors, including globalization, which underlie detachment both from other people and from non-human species. ‘Community’ is also a political rallying-cry, one we will come across again. Other processes underlying people’s separation from one another and the environment can be considered, and these will shortly be addressed. Closely linked to community is individualism. This issue (and the making of individuals with apparently little attachment to one another or to the environment) will also be revisited. Chapter 5 will suggest that it is possible to understand individualism (and its problems) in ways which are better informed than much of the literature covered here. The claim that we are becoming an increasingly individualized society also has major implications for contemporary politics. Chapter 7 discusses the development of an Enlightenment type of politics which focuses on individual rights. These are widely seen as an inadequate way of ensuring that people develop an understanding and control over their lives, their relations with others and with their environment. Chapter 8 will discuss alternative forms of politics which are more collective and which explore alternative values and social forms.

FURTHER READING

Evolution and its relation to social theory

This is a very large topic. A very helpful introduction to evolution as the organizing principle of modern biology (by one of the leading contemporary biologists) is:

E. Mayr, ‘Evolution’, *Scientific American*, 239/3 (1978): 39–49.

One attempt at a brief review of how social scientists have used evolutionary ideas is:

P. Dickens, *Social Darwinism. Linking Evolutionary Thought to Social Theory*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000.

Further useful references include:

T. Ball, *Reappraising Political Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995. (Note in particular Chap. 10, ‘Marx and Darwin: A Reconsideration’.)

- P. Blackledge and G. Kirkpatrick (eds), *Historical Materialism and Social Evolution*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- J. Domingues, 'Evolution, History and Collective Subjectivity', *Current Sociology*, 47/3 (1999): 1–34.
- J. Durrant, 'Scientific Naturalism and Social Reform in the Thought of Alfred Russel Wallace', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 12/40 (1979): 3–58.
- K. Eder, 'Societies Learn and yet the World is Hard to Change', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2/2 (1999): 195–215.
- P. Hirst, *Social Evolution and Sociological Categories*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1976.
- G. Jones, 'Alfred Russel Wallace, Robert Owen and the Theory of Natural Selection', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 25 (2002): 73–96.
- M. Kottler, 'Alfred Russel Wallace, the Origin of Man, and Spiritualism', *Isis*, 65/227 (1974): 145–92.
- N. Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- J. Mingers, 'Can Social Systems be Autopoietic? Assessing Luhmann's Social Theory', *Sociological Review*, 3 (2002): 278–99.
- J. Offer (ed.), *Herbert Spencer. Critical Assessments*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- S. Sanderson, 'Evolutionary Materialism: A Theoretical Strategy for the Study of Social Evolution', *Sociological Perspectives*, 37/1 (1994): 47–73.
- S. Sanderson, *Social Evolutionism. A Critical History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- P. Taylor, 'Natural Selection: A Heavy Hand in Biological and Social Thought', *Science as Culture*, 7/1 (1998): 5–32.
- B. Trigger, *Sociocultural Evolution*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- R. Young, 'Malthus and the Evolutionists: the Common Context of Biological and Social Theory', *Past and Present*, 43 (1969): 109–45.

Industry and consumption

- T. Benton, 'Beyond Left and Right? Ecological Politics, Capitalism and Modernity', in M. Jacobs (ed.), *Greening the Millennium?* Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

Community

For a modern discussion, and one which links community to environmental ethics, see:
M. Smith, *An Ethics of Place. Radical Ecology, Postmodernity and Social Theory*. Albany: State University of New York, 2001.

Another contemporary discussion on the theme of community's decline is:

- D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. New York: Touchstone, 2000.

Risk

- U. Beck, 'Global Risk Politics', in M. Jacobs (ed.), *Greening the Millennium?* Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.
- A. Elliott, 'Beck's Sociology of Risk: a Critical Assessment', *Sociology*, 3/2 (2002): 293–315.

Students interested in a critical survey of the 'risk' question (in the context of a wider discussion of social theory and the environment with particular emphasis on Beck and Giddens) should turn to:

- D. Goldblatt, *Social Theory and the Environment*. Cambridge: Polity, 1996.

The following is useful for a re-statement of Beck's theory, plus criticisms of the theory and Beck's responses:

- B. Adam, U. Beck and J. Van Loon, *The Risk Society and Beyond. Critical Issues for Social Theory*. London: Sage, 2000.

Students will also find very useful in this context:

B. Turner and C. Rojek, *Society and Culture. Principles of Scarcity and Solidarity*. London: Sage, 2001. (*They argue, inter alia, that Beck is wrong to conflate environmental risk with the cultural risk, individualization and so on. The connection between these two types of risk is not adequately made.*)

Students may well wish to monitor the ‘risk society’ thesis in relation to ongoing events. The exceptionally hot summer of 2003 in France, for example, resulted in more than 15,000 deaths. This disaster can be seen as an example of what Beck calls, somewhat chillingly, ‘the democratization of risk’. Note also the blame being shifted away from the underlying social and economic causes of climate change and towards the more visible sphere of national politics.

Journals

Note the following journals, which are consistently helpful in dealing with the issues raised in this chapter and, more generally, in all matters relating to the society–nature links.

Science as Culture

Capitalism, Nature, Socialism

Journal of Critical Realism

A helpful website on the theme of evolution is available at: <<http://science.kennesaw.edu/~matson/evolutionlinks.html>>