

CHAPTER TWO

A CRITICAL SURVEY OF STRUCTURAL HISTORY APPROACHES

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I THE CURRENT CACOPHANY

The writing of economic and social history is now a multifarious, voluminous, and cacophonous business. While economic historiography and historical sociology have long been with us, as we saw in the previous chapter, so-called "social history" writing in its various forms is more recent and now appears to be ubiquitous. It sometimes seems as if all historians now want to climb onto the bandwagon of social history's popularity. "Social history" is becoming part of popular culture and like all elements of popular culture in the electronic post-modern age it has a fluid, intangible, constantly changing character. Its popularity is significant for many reasons, one of which is its role in providing meaning in an anomic, competitive age. With the decline of community and family there arises a counter tendency to recover the past of communities and families, with the hope of reconstructing them or at least producing new ones. Another aspect of significance is the political oppositional character of much social history writing. With the decline of organised party opposition to bureaucratic corporate centralism in most industrial societies opposition has arisen instead at a local, non-class level, and the appropriation of history has been made as a form of or a contribution to grass-roots political ideology. A third aspect, which is to some extent counter but also complementary to the others, is a desire for global comprehension -- to understand how the local is enmeshed in the totality of world structures at all levels.

Self-styled social history writing, then, covers the spectrum from local to global, from personal to structural totality. Therefore, is it any wonder that it is perceived as being not just another branch of history or sociology alongside all the others but as attempting to incorporate them all? However, just as it has come to this position of incorporation it threatens to fly apart. The tensions between microcosmic and macrocosmic inclusiveness, between the local particularities and the structural generalities, are difficult to reconcile. A few heroic efforts have been made, such as by Braudel, Ladurie,

and Hobsbawm, and they point the way perhaps, but they are very difficult to follow. In fact some thinkers about these questions hold that we cannot unite the social studies at all because the study of events and the actions of individuals and groups is different from the study of large-scale structures.¹

This chapter offers a critical survey of the existing methodologies for writing economic and social history. We will see that there are in fact a great many approaches being used, not all with coherence and conceptual rigour and many of which cannot truly be said to be offering explanations of economic and social *structural* history in spite of their names.

The old and crucial problems of the relationships between individuals and structures and between the material, social, and mental aspects of society, were the subject of the important but regrettably short-lived debate between Lawrence Stone, Eric Hobsbawm, and Philip Abrams in *Past and Present* in 1979-80.² In his opening contribution Stone claimed to diagnose the ending of an era in historiography, marked by the apparent abandonment of the attempt to produce "a coherent scientific explanation of change in the past" (p. 19) by the so-called "new historians". They were now leading the way to a "revival of narrative". By the term "new historians" he meant those social historians interested in mentalities, whom he separated from traditional historians. Their shift, he said, was from the "analytical" to the "descriptive" mode, which was made necessary by

¹ See, for example, the defining of social history/historical sociology as being the theoretically informed study of large-scale social structures through time in R. Bendix, *Force, Fate, and Freedom: On Historical Sociology* (1984); F. Braudel, *On History* (1980); the editor's contributions to T. Skocpol (ed), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (1984); A.L. Stinchcombe, *Theoretical Methods in Social History* (1981); C. Tilly, *As Sociology Meets History* (1981) and 'Future History' (1988/89). These contrast with the following works, which defend a conception of social history as distinct from sociology and being concerned with individuals, small groups, and particular structures rather than the comparison of structures: H. Perkin, 'Social History' (1962); G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1944); T. Zeldin, 'Social History and Total History' (1976).

² L. Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History' (1979); E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments' (1980); P. Abrams, 'History, Sociology, Historical Sociology' (1980).

Two other recent and closely related debates, which dealt basically with the same problems of the structure/individual, material/social/mental, and theory/evidence relationships, were over the role of structuralist methods and theories in British Marxist historiography and people's history. For contributions, overviews, and analyses of these debates see E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978); P. Hirst, 'The Necessity of Theory', (1979); P. Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (1980); K. Nield and J. Seed, 'Theoretical Poverty or the Poverty of Theory: British Marxist Historiography and the Althusserians' (1979); K. Nield, 'A Symptomatic Dispute? Notes on the Relation Between Marxian Theory and Historical Practice in Britain' (1980); S. Magarey, 'That Hoary Old Chestnut, Free Will and Determinism: Culture Vs Structure, or History Vs Theory in Britain' (1987).

a major change in attitude about subject matter so that mentalities were brought to the centre of focus. (p. 21) In turn, this shift he saw as depending on prior philosophical assumptions about "the role of human free will in its interaction with the forces of nature" (p. 21) such that it is people rather than structural circumstances that are studied. Therefore, he said,

Historians are now dividing into four groups: the old narrative historians, primarily political historians and biographers; the cliometricians who continue to act like statistical junkies; the hard-nosed social historians still busy analysing impersonal structures; and the historians of *mentalité*, now chasing ideals, values, mind-sets, and patterns of intimate personal behaviour -- the more intimate the better. (p. 21)

Stone was not actually advocating that all historians join the "revival of narrative" or become students of mentalities and he did not develop a case for its superiority. But he did imply at least that the claims of scientific history were ill-founded. While neither Eric Hobsbawm nor Philip Abrams explicitly defended the notion of "scientific history" they did argue that historians and sociologists should be, and often are, attempting to break down the *mentalité*/action/structure and history/sociology divisions. They did not see a methodological turning point occurring in social history, only a shift in subject matter.

Overall, the Stone/Hobsbawm/Abrams "debate" was disappointing because it did not really deal with the central issue of how we can systematically and objectively study *the history of societies* in all their complexity and multi-faceted reality. All three participants understood this to be central but stopped short of developing a survey of existing methodologies or, more importantly, a constructive criticism of approaches that showed the way forward. Abrams did offer some pertinent suggestions but these were not developed in his article.

II AIMS OF THE SURVEY

As a step toward opening up the methodological debate again this chapter offers a survey based on a critical analysis of the philosophical and methodological concepts employed by practising economic and social historians and historical sociologists. There have been surveys before³ but none I think that attempts systematically to examine the

³ Some examples of previous surveys of social historiography are S. Eade, 'Social History in Britain in 1976 - A Survey' (1976); S. Magarey, 'Labour History's New Sub-Title: Social History in Australia in 1981' (1983); H. Perkin, 'Social History in Britain' (1976); P. Stearns, 'Toward a Wider Vision: Trends in Social History' (1980) and 'The New Social History: An Overview' (1983); L. Stone,

various philosophical and methodological assumptions and commitments that underpin practices.

Therefore my *first aim* in this chapter is the abstracting and clarifying of the methodological assumptions that are now *tacitly* used by economic and social historians. Sections III to VII of the chapter contain my survey. In order to construct it I have drawn upon the discussion of general philosophical concepts and issues in the previous chapter.

My *second aim* is to provide the basis for going beyond the survey to present a detailed, extensively exemplified argument in the next chapter about how I believe the study of the history of society should be advancing. In fact, no methodological survey can be developed in isolation from a particular viewpoint. I shall be developing and illustrating as I go certain ideas sketched in the previous chapter to the effect that studies of events must be *united methodologically* at a deep level with studies of structures. That is, I want to argue that the study of *historical social structures* is the core task for *social enquiry*, properly so-called. In other words, *structural history* rather than events, action, behaviour, or individuals as such is the process that gives social enquiry its *raison d'être*. And the appropriate methodology for structural history is methodological structurism, as instanced in the work of, among others, the writers I shall discuss in some detail in the next chapter.

My *third aim* is to begin to set the scene for my argument, against Stone and many others, that structural history can indeed be a science but in a sense quite different from usual arguments for and against it. The argument about the nature of the science of structural history is developed in more detail in Chapter Four. Stone said that various arguments for a scientific approach were untenable but his views were not grounded in an examination of the concept of scientific history. Of course it does not really matter whether we call structural history "scientific" or not but arguments about this term do have a direct bearing upon practice. It is explanation that matters and attention to methodological questions, including the question of science, does affect explanation. Explanations must be and are constrained by philosophical, methodological, and empirical criteria (not to mention cultural and political criteria), so that some explanations are seen as better than others. Without a notion of better and worse explanations and hence explanatory progress according to these intersubjective criteria

'History and the Social Sciences in the Twentieth Century' (1981); P. Thane and A. Sutcliffe, 'Introduction' to *Essays in Social History, Vol 2* (1986).

the whole enterprise of socio-historical enquiry (and socially oriented action) becomes philosophically meaningless. We are not free to say whatever we like about society because along that relativistic route lies radical individualism, hence unargued and irrational force, and ultimately perhaps a descent into tyrannical, Hobbesian, society. That social collapse does not happen, even under conditions of state collapse, except perhaps very rarely and temporarily, shows the deeply contradictory nature of both radical individualism and the denial of the need for more or less shared, objective methodology.

III THE STRUCTURE OF THE CRITICAL SURVEY

The many approaches to writing structural history are grouped into five main "traditions", which are defined primarily by their philosophical commitments to certain concepts of society and of explanation. The aim here is definitely not to provide a survey of or a detailed criticism of the work of particular writers (although some examples will be given) but to construct a set of categories through which to view particular texts. These categories are not meant to be descriptions of actual methodologies that are used but heuristic types for the task of methodological criticism and explanatory progress. Many texts and writers do not fit neatly into a particular category and most writers do not in fact have clearcut methodologies. In fact the works of most social historians straddle approaches, unselfconsciously crawling upon several philosophical positions. While eclecticism and conceptual diversity may enable an element of methodological richness to pervade such work, these are not necessarily helpful. Eclecticism and syncreticism often lead to impoverished explanations. There is clearly a desire among historians, economists, and sociologists to construct better explanations but how to get there is the problem. These categories should help comprehension of the methodological panorama that exists and should point out in general terms why some texts contain better explanations than others.

The criticism of approaches draws upon the philosophical/methodological points made in Sections VI, VII and IX of Chapter One. Let me summarise six of the relevant points made in those sections.

- First, there are *three ontologies and methodologies* that are assumed or explicitly adopted by structural historians -- individualism, holism, and structurism.
- Second, *the subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy is false* because it ignores the structuring interaction between consciousness, action, and real structures.

- Third, *the relationship between causal explanation and hermeneutical understanding should be a close and mutually supportive one*, rather than oppositional. The task is to provide causal explanations but they are not well described by empiricist covering law models of explanation.
- Fourth, *both analytical-statistical and narrative modes of presentation are required* in order to provide adequate accounts of historical processes.
- Fifth, *the comparative method is virtually indispensable* for structural-historical enquiry even though each structure is unique in some respects.
- Sixth, *structural history needs a better conception of science* that is able to provide epistemological support for the less-than-absolute structuralist ontology and methodology advocated above.

Figure 2.1 summarises the survey that follows.

Figure 2.1 Methodological Approaches to Structural History According to their Philosophical Foundations

	Individualism	Holism	Structurism
Empiricist and Individualist Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional Biographical History • Empiricist Historical Sociology and Demography • Traditional Economic History • Orthodox Empirical Social History • Neo-Classical Cliometrics • Behaviourist Individualism • Neo-Classical Institutionalism 		
Systemic-Functionalist Approaches		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functionalist History • Functionalist Modernisation Sociology 	
Interpretist Approaches		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional Historical Interpretism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sociological and Anthropological Interpretism • People's History and Oral History
Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Approaches		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Annales</i> Structuralism - <i>Mentalité</i> - Socio-economic • Ecological History • Marxist Structuralism • Post-Structuralism 	
Relational Structuralist Approaches			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Annales</i> Totalising Structuralist History • Marxist Socio-cultural History • Totalising Marxist History • Marxist Historical Sociology • Weberian Historical Sociology • Elias' Historical Sociology • Touraine's Historical Sociology

IV EMPIRICIST AND INDIVIDUALIST APPROACHES

Empiricism and its cousin positivism are much misunderstood and abused terms that have changed considerably in meaning during the past 150 years.⁴ In general usage, "positivism" refers to a programme of unifying all empirical enquiry on the supposed foundation of the method of natural science, particularly physics. If an enquiry cannot in principle be conducted in a factual, objectivist, manner that attempts to uncover the laws governing phenomena, then it supposedly cannot rightly be called a science, or potential science, and so its findings do not have the status of genuine knowledge. A sharp demarcation is drawn between knowledge and belief.

More recently, logical empiricism was developed as an account of the philosophical foundations of advanced scientific reasoning. The basic tenets of logical empiricism as formulated by philosophers of science in the 1960s and 70s⁵ are:

- a) Logicism -- the attempt to show that objective scientific theory confirmation should conform to the canons of deductive logic.
- b) Empirical verificationism -- the idea that only propositions that are either empirically verifiable (or, in Popper's version, falsifiable) (i.e. synthetic) or are true by definition (i.e. analytic propositions) are scientific. Propositions about unobservable structures are at best instrumental, that is, they are merely convenient fictions and do not have truth content. Synthetic *a priori* propositions, which are statements of fact made prior to any experience of the world, are ruled out entirely.
- c) Theory/observation distinction -- that there is a strict separation between theoretical propositions about unobservables and observations. Observations are the testing grounds for theories but are not determined by theories being, rather, theoretically neutral.
- d) The Humean theory of causation -- establishing a causal relation is a matter of discovering the invariant temporal relationships between types of observable events.

⁴ The history of empiricism and positivism is surveyed by L. Kolakowski, *Positivist Philosophy* (1972); and A.J. Ayer, 'Editor's Introduction' to *Logical Positivism* (1959).

⁵ See, for example, C.G. Hempel, 'On the Standard Conception of Scientific Theories' (1970), and 'The Meaning of Theoretical Terms: A Critique of the Standard Empiricist Construal' (1973); E. McMullin, 'Empiricism at Sea' (1974); D. Shapere, 'Notes Towards a Post-Positivist Interpretation of Science' (1969); F. Suppe, 'The Search for Philosophic Understanding of Scientific Theories' and 'Afterword' (1977).

Now, this precise formulation is not often consciously employed or even unconsciously followed by self-styled empiricist practitioners in the socio-historical studies. This rational reconstruction by philosophers is supposedly drawn from physics and many self-professed empiricist historians deviate from it in various ways. An earlier form of empiricism underlay the mid-19th century attempts by Buckle and Von Ranke to develop a scientific history.⁶ Their different methodologies shared the idea of the priority of observational evidence and the importance of induction for arriving at explanations. In the mid-20th century, empiricist and positivist philosophies reached their apogee in the work of Carl Hempel and Rudolf Carnap.⁷ They influenced attempts by some practitioners of history and sociology to construct a science, notably the cliometricians and the behaviourist exchange theorists. Less orthodox or incomplete versions of empiricism, influenced more by Rankism and "common sense" empirical thinking than by logicians or philosophers, have also underlain the work of other kinds of individualist social historians, notably some of the work of "traditional" Anglophone historians such as Peter Laslett, Richard Cobb, and Theodore Zeldin. Such work tends to be influenced by the older tradition of "common sense" inductivist history which sprang ultimately from Hobbes and Locke but more recently from people such as Buckle, J. S. Mill, Acton, the Webbs, early economic historians such as Rogers and Cunningham, Trevelyan, and Namier.⁸

In fact there is a wide range of empiricist and individualist historical methodologies running from traditional empirical history which eschews sociological generalisations, through consciously empiricist sociological approaches, to fully fledged cliometrics, and fully fledged behaviourism. What unites all historical empiricist approaches is overt commitments to the autonomy of "factual" evidence and

⁶ See in particular H.T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (1857) and L. Von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History* (1983). There is an interesting discussion of Buckle in B. Semmel, 'H.T. Buckle: The Liberal Faith and the Science of History' (1976); and on Von Ranke see the 'Introduction' by Iggers and von Moltke to the above (1983) collection.

⁷ Hempel's major articles from 1942 to 1964 are collected in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (1965), and Carnap's most influential work is *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (1974), which originally appeared as *The Philosophical Foundation of Physics* (1966). See also R. Carnap, 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology', Supplement A of his *Meaning and Necessity* (1956).

⁸ On the British empirical tradition see E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978), pp. 229-242, where he discusses "historical logic", partly in terms of the relationship of "real facts" to the historian's interrogation of them. He somewhat clarifies his position in 'The Politics of Theory' (1981). In both texts, although critical of the role given to theory by structuralists, he affirms an important place for theory and the interpenetration of theory and data and points out how this perspective has guided his empirical work. Among the best examples of "common sense" "social" history that is devoid of theory are the numerous works of Asa Briggs.

methodological individualism, and they sometimes have a tacit commitment to psychological behaviourism, which is itself based on empiricism. They all reject notions about the reality or autonomy of social structures as real structures with irreducible powers, and the theory-ladenness of observations about structures and actions. Their task is carefully to reconstruct the past from factual evidence rather than to offer general interpretations. Let us look briefly at each of six groups.

1) *Traditional Biographical History*

This has been advocated by G.M. Trevelyan⁹ and sometimes practised by Richard Cobb and Theodore Zeldin.¹⁰ What generally characterises the intentions and productions of these historians is a concentration upon examining the actions of individuals and their personal motivations for action. They are actively opposed to sociological theories and statistical generalisations, preferring to try to see each person as basically independent and actions as explicable by reference to "common sense" notions about mentality and behaviour. Those largely unexamined common sense notions sometimes include the idea that humans are rational egoists who always seek for personal or familial advantage. Such history is often presented as large-scale exercises in generalised biography writing, whether of important or unheralded individuals. When it is unheralded individuals or small groups who are examined it is sometimes said that history is being done from the "bottom up".

2) *Empiricist Historical Sociology and Demography*

This approach, unlike the first, actively seeks to explain social structural change. Its concept of social structure tends to be individualist and the methodological relationship between theory and evidence is empiricist. That is, structure is modelled as a set or aggregation of observable occupational and familial positions or roles and the collective pattern of behaviours of a large number of individuals that takes place within that set. In order to examine structure it is a question of examining supposedly objective evidence

⁹ See the Introduction to G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1964), p. viii, where he said that "the sum total of social history ... could only be mastered if we know the biographies of all the millions of men, women, and children who have lived in England. The generalizations which are the stock-in-trade of the social historian, must necessarily be based on a small number of particular instances, which are assumed to be typical..."

¹⁰ See especially R. Cobb, 'Modern French History in Britain' (1974), where he defends his biographical methodology. Examples of his empirical work include the essays collected in *A Second Identity* (1969), as well as *The Police and the People* (1970) and *The People's Armies* (1987). Theodore Zeldin has made clear statements of this methodology in 'Social History and Total History' (1976) and 'Personal History and the History of the Emotions' (1982). See also his major work, *France 1848-1945, 2 Vols* (1970).

about categories of behaviour and individual persons to test hypotheses and develop generalisations from it. Those generalisations then constitute knowledge of structural change. Some of the work of Lawrence Stone, Peter Laslett, E.A. Wrigley, and Alan Macfarlane¹¹ has tended to be of this sort, although they have considerable differences over theory and research techniques. They have all employed sampling and statistical methods to deal with large bodies of atomised "objective" data.

3) *Traditional (or "old") Economic History*

This is a self-consciously empiricist approach in the inductive mode and originated in the late 19th century partly as an attempt to investigate the economic origins of social inequality and working class degradation resulting from industrialisation. Such writers as Toynbee, the Webbs, and the Hammonds¹² were among the first to study the English industrial revolution from this viewpoint. In the 1920s and 30s the tradition began to lose its sociological element and the more narrowly focused, economic and empiricist form of enquiry into past economic action and processes became dominant. This form at first employed simple but later sophisticated economic theory and "common sense" psychological theory but always retained theory-neutral evidence as central. Narrative played and still plays a considerable part in the presentation of results. And concerns with wider questions of the role of demography, classes, social institutions, and ideology

¹¹ Lawrence Stone has produced many massive and valuable studies of English family history such as *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (1965), *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (1977), *An Open Elite? England 1540-1800* (with J.C. Fawtier Stone) (1984). He gave an excellent overview of his methodology in his essay 'Prosopography' (1981), where he defined prosopography as "the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives" (p. 45). He criticised past users of the method, such as Syme and Namier, pointing out the various errors into which they had fallen, and in effect showing how his own work avoids past mistakes. Prosopography has been practised by many historians in recent years. Stone's article introduces some of the recent literature.

Prosopography differs from historical demography in that it is concerned with the positions of real individuals whereas the latter is concerned with statistically aggregated populations. See, for example, the writings where Peter Laslett has described and defended his approach to "social structural history" as being the study of historical demography and family history, such as *The World We Have Lost Further Explored* (1983), Ch 12, and 'Introduction: The Necessity of a Historical Sociology' (1971). This approach has also been called "experimental history" by Laslett and some of his associates. See K.W. Wachter, E.A. Howard, and P. Laslett (eds), *Statistical Studies of Historical Social Structure* (1978), especially Ch 2; and W.K. Wachter and E.A. Hammel, 'The Genesis of Experimental History' (1986).

E.A. Wrigley has not made such an equation between historical demography and social structural history. But of course he has made very important contributions to studying the economic and social influence of demography, as in *Population and History* (1969) and *People, Cities, and Wealth* (1987). The methodological basis of anthropologically informed historical demography as a form of social history is defended by Alan Macfarlane in 'History, Anthropology and The Study of Communities' (1977), and *The Origins of English Individualism* (1978).

¹² See the Bibliography for the relevant works.

in economic history do still exist in the discipline.¹³ These characteristics set it apart from the "new" economic historians, or cliometricians, who parted company over these methodological and sociological issues.

4) *Orthodox Empirical Social History*

This is a rather vague label for an amorphous approach that is probably the major form of social historiography in the Anglophone world. The approach has largely grown out of old economic history, sharing methodological assumptions with it, and has developed since the 1950s largely as a consequence of a growing disenchantment with the narrowness of the subject matters of economic and political history rather than because of serious methodological objections or innovations. These historians agree with economic history's traditional concerns with questions about such things as the standard of living, social classes, and the processes of production. They wish to go further in that direction and include all kinds of enquiries about daily life. Their methodology is usually opposed to the use of sociological theory in any strong, organisational sense, and although some attention is paid to general structures and structural processes, the main emphasis is given to careful empirical enquiry into particular actions, events, classes, and social movements. There is little conceptual development about society and what there is tends to be commonsensical.¹⁴ The questions of methodology and theory have not been explicitly raised by most of them and they remain resolutely committed to the autonomy of historical enquiry from social science. And while counting has become important they have not adopted statistical techniques in the way that some other empiricists have done. Their empiricism remains largely unreflective. This is not so with the fifth approach, the "new" economic history, or neo-classical cliometrics.

¹³ Good examples of old economic history abound, such as P. Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation* (1969); M.M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (1972); C. Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship, 1603-1763* (1965); and most of the chapters of the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe, Eight Volumes* (1942-1978). The methodology of "old" economic history is discussed by M.M. Postan, *Fact and Relevance* (1971) and a sample of opinions and discussions by prominent practitioners from 1893 onwards is contained in N.B. Harte (ed), *The Study of Economic History* (1971), who contributes a brief survey of the institutionalisation of the discipline in Britain. See also D.C. Coleman, *History and the Economic Past* (1987) for the history of the discipline.

¹⁴ Some examples include A. Briggs, *A Social History of England* (1983); N. Hampson, *A Social History of the French Revolution* (1963); H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (1969); and the volumes in the *Pelican Social History of Britain* under the general editorship of J.H. Plumb.

5) *Neo-Classical Cliometrics or New Economic History*

Cliometrics is a slightly misleading name for the group which bears it because accurate measurement is only part of what characterises their methodology. More importantly, new economic historians, who are really applied economists, tend to employ large-scale quantification, econometrical techniques, neo-classical economic theory, and nomological-deductivist epistemology.¹⁵ All of these characteristics set them apart from the three previous groups who are either less enamoured of econometrical techniques or reject them entirely, employ only a vaguely defined behaviourist theory to explain action, and develop inductive generalisations. The cliometricians have been directly influenced by recent logical empiricist epistemology, especially as propounded by Carl Hempel, which has taught that only nomological-deductive explanations can be considered as scientific. Neo-classical rational action theory provides the laws from which deductions about behaviour are made. This is a form of dispositional behaviourism which directs research toward the particular observable environmental stimuli and conditioning of the utility-maximising disposition that is supposed to be present within all people. According to original behaviourism the only steps in the causal chain are observable environmental stimuli and observable behaviour. No supposedly independent mental or social factors can be included in the causal account of behaviour. More recently, dispositional behaviourism has allowed that fixed psychological dispositions (or human nature) intervene between stimulus and behaviour. There appears to be little place in neo-classical economics and cliometrics for variability of human nature, or the intervention of independent, unpredictable intentions, or a role for unobservable but irreducible social and cultural structures. Since their epistemology requires an equation of explanation and prediction they believe they have to rely upon a fixed, determining law of behaviour.

6) *Behaviourist Individualism*

This kind of individualism is directly defended and exemplified in the work of George Homans and James S. Coleman.¹⁶ Like neo-classical cliometrics, with which their work

¹⁵ On the methodology of cliometrics see the works of R.W. Fogel in the Bibliography and D.N. McCloskey, 'The Achievements of the Cliometric School' (1978) and *Cliometric History* (1988); P.D. McClelland, *Causal Explanation and Model Building in History, Economics, and the New Economic History* (1975); L.E. Davis and S. Engerman, 'Cliometrics: The State of the Science' (1987). The methodological and philosophical importance of quantification and statistical methods is continually defended in *Historical Methods*. See especially Vol. 17, Nos. 3 and 4 (1984) for a collection of such articles.

¹⁶ This approach is sometimes called "rational exchange theory". See the works of G.C. Homans and J.S. Coleman listed in the Bibliography. A less reductionist version of this approach has been developed by Peter Blau, such as in *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (1977) and 'A Macrosociological Theory of Social Structure' (1977-78).

shares methodological ground, their sociological writings are methodologically explicit. They contain an aggregational (or reductionist) notion of structure so that the concept is largely instrumental, not meant to refer to a real entity with properties and powers. Society is conceived as systematic patterns of behaviour and the task is to search for the stimuli that influence the operation of the human rationality disposition. But these sociologists have produced little historical work.¹⁷

7) *Neo-classical Institutional Economics*

Recently some economists and economic historians have become disenchanted with the narrowness of new economic history and have widened their theories to include institutional and ideological components. They have produced an impressive body of work on the general problem of the long-run rise and decline of economies and nations.¹⁸ Their basic philosophical commitment is to the rational individualism of neo-classical economics, as I pointed out in the previous chapter.

I think it can be seen that all these approaches more or less share the fundamental empiricist notions about the priority of empirical observations; the instrumental nature of structural concepts; and the sharp distinction between theories and observations, the latter being epistemologically privileged. A narrative presentation which in effect tacitly adopts a Humean idea of causation as event-event succession is adopted by the first four groups, and although the others are not essentially narrativists they have a similar idea of causation, rejecting the idea of realist structural causation. They also oppose the idea that human action is fundamentally intentionally rather than psychologically caused and propose various forms of psychological dispositionalism to help explain action. Humans are thought to act due to relatively fixed, pre-given dispositional drives which are prior to reason, dominate intentions, and are triggered by observable environmental events.

V SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONALIST APPROACHES

This approach to explaining economic and social history also operates in a positivist framework but is clearly opposed to many aspects of empiricism. Most notably,

¹⁷ One exception is George Homans' early book, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (1941), which does employ a rudimentary version of his rational exchange theory. See also James Coleman's highly schematic account of the rise of extra-individual corporations as rational actors in his *Power and the Structure of Society* (1974).

¹⁸ The best examples are the work of D.C. North, M. Olson, and E.L. Jones, as listed in the Bibliography. See also Section X of Chapter One above for other comments on their work.

it not only postulates the existence of society as an organic-like, real structure but claims that there are causally efficacious functional relationships binding society together into a tightly integrated holistic system.

The ambiguous legacy of 19th century positivism has made it possible for both holistic functionalists and individualists to claim to be positivists, offering different ways of constructing a positive science of society. What sets systemic-functionalism apart in this regard is its ontological holism and a different comprehension of the structure of scientific reasoning. Under the influence of logical empiricism, it has adopted a nomological-deductivist approach to theory confirmation rather than the inductivist route to generalisations of the traditional empiricist historians.

Systemic-functionalist social theory grew out of a confluence of Darwinian biological theory, evolutionary sociology, functionalist anthropology, systems theory and cybernetics, and deductivist positivism.¹⁹ Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, Marion Levy, and Neil Smelser constructed a new framework on these foundations in the 1950s.²⁰ It was immediately influential, particularly in the United States, partly because of its all-encompassing scientific claims and its apparent refutation of Marxism in a Cold War climate. It was employed by, amongst others, those economic development theorists (such as Bert Hoselitz, Wilbert Moore, and Joseph Spengler) who were attempting to construct an anti-Marxist, pro-capitalist theory to explain modernisation and to implement capitalist development strategies in the Third World.²¹

In brief, the main tenets of the systemic-functionalist approach to socio-economic history are, firstly, an organic concept of structure -- society supposedly has powers of self-maintenance, self-regulation, and self-adjusting equilibrium. Each element of the whole has an integrating functional role within it. Although Parsons and Shils referred to their theory as an 'action theory', genuine human action actually plays a dependent or

¹⁹ On the origins of systemic-functionalist theory see G. Rocher, *Talcott Parsons and American Sociology* (1974); T. Parsons, 'On Building Social Systems Theory: A Personal History' (1970); W. E. Moore, 'Functionalism' (1979).

²⁰ The foundational canon consists mainly of T. Parsons, *The Social System* (1951); T. Parsons and E.A. Shils (eds), *Toward A General Theory of Action* (1951); M. Levy, *The Structure of Society* (1952); and T. Parsons and N. Smelser, *Economy and Society* (1956).

²¹ On the origins and early development of functionalist modernization theory see B. Hoselitz (ed), *The Progress of Underdeveloped Areas* (1952); D. Chirot, 'Changing Fashions in the Study of the Social Causes of Economic and Political Change' (1981); S.N. Eisenstadt, 'Studies of Modernization and Sociological Theory' (1974); and A. Smith, *The Concept of Social Change* (1973).

stunted role in their work. Humans are in fact what has been accurately described as "oversocialised" and "cultural dopes" in their theory.²² Apparently the only real actor is the whole society. Secondly, there is a central role for general theories and model-building in directing research and interpreting empirical evidence. Thirdly, there is the adoption of an evolutionary theory of social change that directs attention toward societal growth through adaptation and differentiation leading to higher stages of equilibrium.

Talcott Parsons was never a historian, remaining as an abstract grand theorist of social change, insofar as he considered the question of change at all. His theory was quasi-Darwinian in that it directed attention to the role of social "mutations" in promoting the adaptive ability of particular societies within a hostile, competitive environment made up of natural conditions and other societies. The result of this process over time was the gradual differentiation of societies in terms of their internal structure. Furthermore, certain mutations were considered to be universally significant, leading to a general development of all human societies because of the adaptive power of these mutations and their subsequent spread to all societies.²³

This general theory has been applied to actual historical research by functionalist historians such as Neil Smelser and Mark Gould,²⁴ and the functionalist-modernization sociologists such as Bert Hoselitz, Daniel Lerner, and Everett Hagen.²⁵ Smelser analysed the evolution of British working class actions and institutions as a process of differentiation and adaptation. He expressly employed a functionalist-evolutionary theory and model to write what he called "sociological history", which was a form of applied social theory. Similarly, the modernization theorists employed a simplistic model of "traditional" and "modern" societies with a theory of the process carrying some societies from the first to the second state resting on the crucial role of "deviant" entrepreneurs. Some of these writers investigated in great detail the

²² D. Wrong, 'The Oversocialised Conception of Man in Modern Sociology' (1961); and A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981), p. 18.

²³ T. Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966).

²⁴ N. J. Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (1959), 'Sociological History: The Industrial Revolution and the British Working Class Family' (1967), 'Processes of Social Change' (1967); and M. Gould, *Revolution in the Development of Capitalism* (1987).

²⁵ B. Hoselitz, *Sociological Aspects of Economic Growth* (1960); D. Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1963); E.E. Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change* (1962).

psychological sources of such deviance in the child-raising practices of marginalised groups.²⁶

VI INTERPRETIST APPROACHES

So far, we have seen how the empiricist tradition concentrates on individual actors and their dispositional motives, and how the functionalist tradition concentrates on holistic social systems and the socialisation of actors within them. Some exponents of each tradition claim to be constructing a positive science of history. Conversely, the defenders of the third kind of approach to social history -- Interpretism -- reject any notion of a scientific approach to human enquiry. Humanistic explanation (or understanding) for this third approach is *hermeneutical*, although they do not always use this term. They see their task as imaginative interpretation and reconstruction of past acts, events, episodes, cultures, mentalities, and even epochs. For pure interpretists, such objects of enquiry do not have an objective existence and so are not susceptible to an objective analysis of their structures. Only hermeneutical understanding can grasp them as a whole gestalt entity.²⁷ Descriptive narration is the only appropriate method of presentation of results of such an enquiry, and every narration will be different because the story is always told from a particular point of view. Such historians rely upon insight and intuitive grasping of the meaning of actions, beliefs, and epochs which come from a total immersion in and attempted rethinking of the ways of thinking of a milieu. There are three broad streams of historical interpretism.

1) *Traditional Historical Interpretism*

Until recently this has been the main historical methodology in Anglophone countries this century. Exemplars include some of the writings of Hugh Trevor-Roper and G.R. Elton.²⁸ They eschew present-oriented sociological and psychological theory and rely upon "common sense" interpretations of constellations of events and epochs. These writers

²⁶ See Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change* (1962), and D.C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (1961).

²⁷ The necessity for hermeneutical enquiry in history has been defended by, among many others, Richard Harvey Brown. See the Bibliography for examples of his writings.

²⁸ Among their many empirical and methodological works see H. Trevor-Roper, *Religion, The Reformation, and Social Change* (1967), *The Rise of Christian Europe* (1965), and *History and Imagination* (Valedictory Lecture) (1980); G.R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors* (1955), *The Practice of History* (1967), *Reform and Reformation* (1977), and *Which Road to the Past?* (with R.W. Fogel) (1983). There is also a defence of traditional interpretism in Berlin, 'The Concept of Scientific History' (1960).

have been indirectly influenced by the ordinary-language school of philosophy emanating mainly from Cambridge and Oxford in the 1950s as a reaction against logical positivism. This school saw the task of explanation as being the linguistic situating of common sense meanings and their comprehension as part of everyday language use. It was not their task to analyse the underlying structure or the social grounding of language or meaning. Accordingly, traditional interpretive historians see their task as being to understand the meaning of past social epochs, events, and lives, as expressed in the recorded utterances and actions of important individuals. Concepts of society as an independent structure with causal power play no part in their work but they do usually have a vaguely holistic concept of the "zeitgeist" or "character" of an epoch.

2) *Sociological and Anthropological Interpretism*

This approach does have a central role for theory in historical explanation while also still seeing the hermeneutical method as essential. These writers have been influenced by Max Weber, recent German phenomenological and hermeneutical philosophers such as Schutz and Gadamer, American symbolic interactionist sociologists such as Mead and Goffman, and the findings of cultural anthropology. Accordingly, they have a quasi-phenomenological concept of society as having only a partly objective, external existence, always being mediated by and known through forms of consciousness, but a consciousness that is shared to some degree. Because these writers wish to go beyond pure phenomenology and relativism to analyse the dialectical interrelationships between forms of consciousness and real social structures they have attempted to link micro enquiries about beliefs with macro structural enquiries. One of the ways they have attempted to do this is by employing the "dramaturgical" model of social action. In this model social structures and situations are like scripts of a drama which people perform before an audience. Social reality is something that is constructed only in the context of the play and the audience interacts with the cast so that the distinction between them is blurred and their positions are sometimes altered. The script is also being constantly tinkered with and occasionally rewritten, especially by powerful individuals.²⁹

Some prominent examples of sociological and anthropological interpretism, or what can also be called "symbolic realism" or "anthropological history", are found in the

²⁹ The dramaturgical model is discussed by K. Burke, 'Interaction: Dramatism', (1968); R. Harré, *Social Being* (1979), Ch 10; and S. Lyman and M.B. Scott, *The Drama of Social Reality* (1975).

work of Clifford Geertz, Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Peter Burke.³⁰ Their work places them among the leading representatives of Stone's "new historians" who deal with mentalities. They have a close affinity with the *mentalité* stream of the *Annales* School of Historians, whom I shall discuss in a moment, and their interest in mentalities coincides with that of some of the biographical historians, such as Cobb and Zeldin. These theoretically informed interpretists try to retain a central place for both the structuring social power of people and the power of cultural structures (or symbol systems) to influence action. Although they are ambivalent about the degree of independence and power of social structures and cultures, this ambivalence is not necessarily a weakness because most of them have sensitively and extensively explored the fundamental problem of the complex interrelationships between subjective human understandings, action, and objective structures. The work of Geertz will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

3) *People's History and Oral History*

This third stream of interpretism may seem out of place in this general category. People's history and oral history are rightly referred to as "movements" because they have a political, proselytising zeal, attempting directly to link their historical work to grassroots social criticism.³¹ Biographical, feminist, and local history are often seen by them as ways of recapturing self and community control. The politicality of inter-personal

³⁰ See the Bibliography for works by Geertz, Darnton, Davis, and Burke. Keith Thomas's important work on witchcraft, while not quite the same as symbolic realism, should also be mentioned here: *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971).

The relationship between history and anthropology has been discussed recently by B.S. Cohn, 'History and Anthropology: The State of Play' (1980) and 'Anthropology and History in the 1980s: Toward a Rapprochement' (1981); R. Darnton, 'The History of Mentalités: Recent Writings on Revolution, Criminality, and Death in France' (1978), and 'The Symbolic Element in History' (1986); N.Z. Davis, 'Anthropology and History in the 1980s: The Possibilities of the Past' (1981); H. Medick, "'Missionaries in the Row Boat?" Ethnological Ways of Knowing as a Challenge to Social History' (1987); M. Sahlins, 'Other Times, Other Customs: The Anthropology of History' (1983); R.G. Walters, 'Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians' (1980); R. Chartier, *Cultural History* (1988); R.I. Levy, 'The Quest for Mind in Different Times and Different Places' (1989); L.Hunt, 'Introduction: History, Culture and Text' (1989); E. Tonkin, M. McDonald, and M. Chapman (eds), *History and Ethnicity* (1989).

³¹ People's history writing, which in Britain has been closely associated with the journal *History Workshop* and its associated seminars, workshops, and conferences, was initially influenced by, among other things, the work of A.L. Morton, E.P. Thompson, and Christopher Hill. R. Samuel gives an eclectic and perhaps too broadly defined overview of the history of this genre in 'People's History' (1981). See also the articles by D. Seabourne and R. Samuel, 'On the Methods of History Workshop' (1980); and P. Burke, 'People's History or Total History' (1981).

Oral history, like people's history, is now widely practised. One of its chief advocates has been Paul Thompson -- see his *The Voice of the Past* (1978) and various issues of *Oral History Journal*. There is a penetrating critique in J. Murphy, 'The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography, and Oral Memory' (1986).

relations is asserted, sometimes through examining the historical origins of local power structures in order to overcome oppression in everyday life. One of the aims of these movements is to recapture the full complexity of the lives and social situations of ordinary, powerless people; to rescue them, as Edward Thompson put it, from the condescension of posterity. While such enquiries should be and often are informed by structural theory, they frequently rely essentially upon a hermeneutical method through which the historian closely questions the subject to establish a circle of understanding. In a purely hermeneutical enquiry a close, shared understanding (akin to a psychoanalytic diagnosis) is established, which draws its authenticity from the fact of agreement and not from *a priori* theory or inductive generalisations based on "factual" data. These "movements" are not purely hermeneutical but, like all the streams based on this methodological tradition, explanatory primacy is given to actors' understandings and perceptions of their situations, experiences, and motivations. But in contrast with the traditional historical interpretists mentioned above and the orthodox social historians I discussed in Section III they are usually more theoretically informed and structurally aware.

VII STRUCTURALIST APPROACHES

"Structuralism" is a many-faceted and much used term. All adherents to a structuralist methodology, properly so-called, are opposed to individualism, empiricism, and hermeneutics. Structuralists attempt to uncover the nature, effects, and history of social structures as independently real entities. This they share with systemic-functionalists, who are also sometimes called structuralists. There are many forms of structural theory in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. Here I want first to discuss the most influential form and the one that most people would immediately associate with the term "structuralism" -- what I shall call Francophone Structuralism because of its origins.

1) *Francophone Structuralism*

Unlike systemic-functionalism of the Parsons kind, with which they share much, and the empiricist structuralism of the Homans kind, most Francophone Structuralists hold that structure is not an observable system governed by cybernetic, cultural, or psychological mechanisms. Rather, for them structure takes one or other of two quite different forms. Firstly, it can be (as in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean Piaget, Roland Barthes, and Louis Althusser) a set of abstract principles, susceptible perhaps to logico-mathematical formalisation, that are inherent but hidden within

observable languages, cultures, ways of knowing and social structures. Or secondly, structure can be (as in the work of Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, and some other *Annales* historians) a large-scale set of geographic, economic, and social relations and behavioural patterns that link multitudes of people together in definite ways and determine the events of observable history.

Francophone structuralism has therefore given rise to two overlapping streams of historical work, both loosely associated with the journal *Annales: Economies, Societies, Civilisations*. The first stream, which originated with the writings of Emile Durkheim and Lucien Febvre, concentrates on "mentalités", forms of collective belief, understanding, and representation that causally influence action and thus help to explain action and social change. The usual task here is to uncover and articulate the fundamental and little changing linguistic and cultural principles governing ways of thinking in past epochs.³² The second stream, which originated with the writings of Francois Simiand, Henri Pirenne, and Marc Bloch, examines large-scale socio-economic structures over long periods of time. Such structures are theorised as multi-layered with multi-temporal dimensions. Their study is distinguished sharply from the history of events -- i.e. from '*histoire événementielle*'.³³ But there is a serious doubt regarding the nature of these sorts of structure because they are usually not well conceptualised. Braudel, for example, seems to hold that behavioural patterns rather than the social rules, roles, and relations that constrain behaviour, are the elements of structure. In that case, structure is conceived as the *observable* pattern of human life, which runs counter to the epistemologically

³² Lucien Febvre's work has been very influential in this regard; see the Bibliography for examples of his writings available in English. The influence of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism on the French study of *mentalité* is problematic. An example of its application is E.L.R. Ladurie, *Love, Death, and Money in the Pays d'Oc* (1984). Other problematic issues include the relationship between mentalities and ideologies, and the relevance of historical materialism to their study -- i.e. the relationship between mentalities and other aspects of social life.

The study of mentality has been much advocated, among others by Lawrence Stone, and practised in many countries. For some discussions of its problems and references to examples see A. Burguière, 'The Fate of the history of Mentalities in the *Annales*' (1983); P. Burke, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the History of Mentalities' (1986); P.H. Hutton, 'The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History' (1981); M.A. Gismondi, 'The Gift of Theory: A Critique of the *Histoire des Mentalités*' (1985); J. Le Goff, 'Mentalities: A History of Ambiguities' (1985); M. Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities* (1990). See also the references to discussions of the relationship of anthropology and history given in note 30 above.

³³ On the methodology of *Annales*: macro-structural history see F. Braudel, *On History* (1980); E.L.R. Ladurie, *The Mind and Method of the Historian* (1981), Ch.1; T. Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (1976) and 'Social History: Perspective of the *Annales* Paradigm' (1978).

dominant principle of Francophone structuralism.³⁴ The method of *structuralisme*, as developed by Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Piaget, is predicated upon an ontology of unobservable elements and layers requiring a non-empiricist science. There is a tension in Braudel's books between his massive data collecting about the observable patterns of daily life and his almost *ad hoc* assertions about the existence of structural layers and his neglect of mentalities. In spite of his claims that it is the long-term history of structure that he was primarily concerned with, his concept of structure remained underdeveloped.

A metaphor that is often used to characterise structuralist methodology is that of "archaeology". The task of the archaeologist is to sift carefully and incorporate a vast amount of evidence in order to piece together the architecture, lifestyle, culture, politics, and economy of a past epoch. The ideal result is a *total* reconstruction. Many *Annalistes* (including Braudel and Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie) see their approach as totalising -- all structural levels, cycles, phases, events, and transformations must be incorporated into a total history.³⁵ But the actual achievement of a genuinely totalising result is rare for it requires at least the employment of both mentalistic and geo-socio-economic concepts of structure. Ladurie has approached this complexity in *Carnival in Romans*,³⁶ which I shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

Another important question about Francophone structuralism generally concerns the agency/action/structure interrelationship. For example, Braudel's books have little place for structuring human agency in spite of his concern with the activities of daily life and the supposedly autonomous, creative role of international capitalism. Structures are apparently remarkably stable and persistent across epochs and the surface pattern of events and actions disturbs them little. On the other hand, Ladurie has achieved in some of his work a remarkable synthesis of structuralism (*à la* Lévi-Strauss) and historical agency. Such work shows what a totalising, multi-layered, multi-temporal, approach can achieve. He gives a central place to sudden ruptures in structural evolution brought about by collective action of the sort analysed in *Carnival*. The dialectic of continuity and transformation is, as Piaget taught, a fundamental reality of all structure and at its

³⁴ Braudel gives some articulation of his concept of structure in *Civilization and Capitalism* (1981-84), *Vol I*: pp. 23-25 and 559-563, *Vol II*: pp. 21-26, *Vol III*: pp. 623-632; and *On History* (1980), pp. 27-52 and 64-80.

³⁵ On the idea and methodology of "archaeological" total history see Febvre, *A New Kind of History* (1973), Ch 3; Braudel, *On History* (1980), pp. 33-4 and p. 76; and E.L.R. Ladurie, *The Territory of the Historian* (1979), Ch 7.

³⁶ E.L.R. Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans* (1981).

best Ladurie's work attempts to address that reality.³⁷ As a consequence he goes beyond *structuralisme*.

One further aspect of the *Annales* School needs mention -- the important role given to theory in their work. Some of them are sophisticated employers of theory of various kinds -- geographical, ecological, sociological, psychological, economic, linguistic. As such, they can be seen, at their best, as interdisciplinary social scientists -- drawing on a wide range of theory and evidence to try to explain the empirical complexities of actual structural processes, actions, and events.

2) *Ecological Structuralism*

The nearest equivalents to *Annales* structuralism in the Anglophone world are those books which have employed a long-term ecological perspective on social change. As with many of the *Annalistes*, some of the writings of W.G. Hoskins, W.H. McNeill, A. Grenfell Price, and A.W. Crosby,³⁸ for example, see the interaction of people as biological and social beings with the natural environment as being crucial to structural change. This is not really a different methodology, only a particular theory within the broad structuralist methodology -- the structural constraints in this case being human biology and/or the geographical environment. Unfortunately, the methodological basis of ecological history has not been well articulated by these historians. The relationship of the ecological approach to social history and to historical geography needs to be explored. Of course the awareness of the importance of ecological structures in a wider socio-historical framework has been well recognised by many others apart from the *Annalistes*, such as Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner.³⁹

3) *Marxist Structuralism*

The Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser has been a vigorous defender of the epistemology of structuralism, claiming that Marx was the original structuralist. The core of his defence is the notion of "totality" -- society is a totality that makes possible

³⁷ See the Bibliography for Ladurie's works available in English.

³⁸ See, for example, W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) and *The Age of Plunder: King Henry's England, 1510-1547* (1976); A.G. Price, *The Western Invasion of the Pacific and its Continents* (1963); W.H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (1977), *The Human Condition: An Ecological and Historical View* (1980), and *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society Since A.D. 1000* (1983); and A.W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (1986).

³⁹ See especially Geertz, *Agricultural Involution* (1963); and Gellner, *Muslim Society* (1981).

and structures everything within it, notably actions and events.⁴⁰ This is a holistic ontology that is similar to that of Talcott Parsons except that for Parsons social relations are a visible cybernetic hierarchy whereas for Althusser the causal relations are invisible and knowable only through their effects as relations of social dominance and subjection. Similarly, Immanuel Wallerstein's Marxist approach to the history of the modern world system is structuralist in the sense that the world totality determines the particular modes of production that exist in particular places at particular times. That is, a holistic system is asserted to exist which controls and structures the economies within it.⁴¹

Wallerstein's work contains one attempted way out of the problem that both holistic structuralists and systemic evolutionists get themselves into. That problem is to account for change. His "solution" is to posit a reified collective agent -- a carrier of history (the bourgeoisie) -- within the structure. Althusser's "solution" is to posit the structure as its own cause. Braudel's "solution" is a tendency to ignore transformation in favour of describing continuity and cycles. Parsons seeks the "genetic" mutations and selection conditions within organic systems. None of them has an important place in their theory for the relative autonomy of human thought and action.

4) *Post-Structuralist Historiography*

Another proposed way out of the structuralist problem is represented by the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault.⁴² His "solution" is in effect to deny the existence of history as a process. For him specific discourses, world views, epochs, do not evolve into new ones. Rather, there are complete ruptures of one into another, without continuity or progress. The problem, then, as he has seen it, has not been to account for change but to uncover "archaeologically" and reconstruct the essential structure of these particular discourses and epochs and to show the power relations that exist within them. In order to do this he attempts to transcend all preconceptions, especially of a historical kind, so that he can grasp each system of knowledge in its own terms, there being no external

⁴⁰ L. Althusser and E. Balibar, *Reading Capital* (1970), especially Ch 9.

⁴¹ Wallerstein's general approach is best seen in *The Capitalist World-Economy* (1979), Ch 9, *Historical Capitalism* (1983), *passim*, and *The Politics of the World-Economy* (1984), Chs.2 and 15.

⁴² Most of Foucault's work is now available in English. For overviews and discussions see H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982); A. Megill, 'Foucault, Structuralism, and the Ends of History' (1979); and A. Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (1980).

criteria of truth or progress. He seems to advocate a radical relativism while adopting a transcendent position for himself.

It is important to emphasise that historical structuralism does not have to be holistic. Piaget argued strongly against the idea that structures were either unchanging or somehow changed themselves. Many histories written in the *Annales* tradition of totalising history, including works by Febvre and Ladurie, have had their social structures populated with real agential people -- making their own history within structural conditions and constraints. In fact this kind of structuralism, which emphasises the reality and effectiveness of structures at the same time as denying them a holistic character, is a form of what I have called "methodological structurism", to contrast it with "methodological holism". There are also other French sociologists and historians (not to mention many writers from other countries), notably Alain Touraine and Pierre Bourdieu, who have developed other forms of structuralism free from holism.⁴³

VIII RELATIONAL-STRUCTURIST APPROACHES

A broad relational-structurist tradition of structural history writing can be identified, which is far from being a school or a single coherent approach but in effect unites some *Annales* historians, some Marxist historians and sociologists, some Weberian and quasi-Weberian historians and sociologists, the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias and his followers, the action sociology of Alain Touraine and his group, and some others who neither owe conscious allegiance to nor easily fit into one or other of these groups. The hidden unity of their work can be understood as based partly on their employment of the methodological structurism I have articulated in the previous chapter. This methodology is closely related to what is now widely known as the "structurationist" framework for social explanation. This comprehensive framework for approaching the explanation of the person/action/society/time complex of interrelationships, which was recently articulated by Anthony Giddens and Philip Abrams, contains a set of concepts about ontology, methodology, and theory. In fact the framework has existed in embryonic form for a long time, most notably in some of the historical writings of Marx and Weber and as the core of Piaget's philosophy but Giddens, who coined the term, has been less than assiduous (unlike Abrams, who called it "the problematic of structuring") in tracing the history of structurationism or in uncovering its

⁴³ For Touraine's and Bourdieu's work available in English see the Bibliography.

tacit existence in the work of many contemporary social historians and historical sociologists. More seriously, he has failed to articulate clearly how his version of structurationism can be made relevant to empirical research. The lack of an empirical/historical dimension in his work weakens his claim to have provided a new framework rather than the articulation of an existing one. Nevertheless, we must be grateful for his convenient formulation of the tenets of this approach.⁴⁴

Giddens' account of structurationism can be summarised in five points :

1. A central ontological and methodological place is given to the conscious but decentred human agent who has social structuring power.
2. Neither the human agent nor society is considered to have primacy -- each is constituted in and through recurrent practices.
3. Institutions are theorised as structured social practices that have a broad spatial and temporal extension. Structure as institutionalised relations is the outcome of the social practices it recursively organises.
4. Social conduct and social structure are conceived as fundamentally temporal and specifically environmentally located.
5. The forces for social change have to be looked for in the causal interrelationships between action, consciousness, institutions, and structures.

This means that those who employ such an approach have a realist ontology of society as consisting fundamentally of institutionalised and historical social relations, and a theory of persons as social agents who structure the social world through time. Social structure is modelled as a hierarchy of "levels" of relations, that provide the structure for the rules, roles, and practices that institutionalise those relations. Structure and action, then, are not the poles of society but two moments in a dialectical duality.

Giddens' structurationism and the methodological structurism I have been developing here are not quite the same set of ideas. Structurationism is a broader and more detailed framework of ideas, incorporating ontological, methodological, and theoretical elements. It purports to be a total framework for socio-historical explanation, offered in opposition to structural-functionalism and Francophone structuralism, in particular. Methodological structurism can be seen, on the other hand, as a component of

⁴⁴ The most extensive statement is in Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (1984). There is a short convenient summary in Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (1982), pp. 8-11. Most of the fundamental methodological ideas of Giddens are shared by P. Abrams in *Historical Sociology* (1982); and A. Touraine in *The Self-Production of Society* (1977).

the broader structurationist framework, but not necessarily having meaning and significance only within that framework. It is logically possible to employ methodological structurism with ontological individualism but in practice I know of no examples, and there are various forms of structurist theory that are compatible with the structurist methodology.

The concepts "structurationism" and "methodological structurism" are not employed by any historian, as far as I know, but their main elements are in effect employed in various explicit as well as implicit ways by many historians. They have become part of our way of thinking without everybody being well aware of it because of the pervasive, unacknowledged influence that Marxian, Weberian, and Piagetian theories have had on the social sciences in recent decades. (I shall discuss the historical background of structurism in the next chapter.) However, within their underlying unity around the ideas of real structures of social relations, the power of the structuring process, and the methodology of structurism, the approaches and theories of these historians are quite diverse. In regard to theory of social change, for example, although they all have an abstract model of structure as consisting of several "levels", they are certainly not all historical materialists. That is, they do not all see the technological or economic "level" as explanatorily primary. Even among those who have varying degrees of allegiance to Marxism there are some who in effect reject materialist explanations and among the Weberians there are some weak materialists. In other words, Marxism and Weberism are neither monolithic schools of historians nor consistently adhered to theories. It is possible to identify the following seven streams within this broad tradition, which are differentiated mainly according to their general concepts, uses of theory, and emphasis upon different aspects of the social totality.

1) *Marxist Socio-cultural History*

These historians are opposed to structuralism and economistic reductionism. Many of them belong to the vaguely defined British Marxist school, including Christopher Hill, Edward Thompson, and Raymond Williams. What primarily sets their work apart from other similar Marxists is their emphasis on the mental or cultural structures of past social life, a concept of social class as social practice rather than rigid structure, and an examination of the actual historical life experience of representative individuals, small groups, and social movements. Overt theory and comparison play little role in most of their historical work.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Of course the work of these historians has not been entirely confined to the socio-cultural level. Christopher Hill has written extensively on economic history. He has been the least theoretically

2) *Totalising Marxist History*

Another stream of Marxist history writing is more structurally oriented in that it primarily investigates the history of social, economic, and political structures but without neglecting events and the actions of individuals, groups, and classes. This kind of totalising history is similar to some of Ladurie's work. All aspects of the social totality are investigated for their mutual influence and causal relationships. Explicit theory and comparison play a larger role than in the former approach, but this is still not a form of applied theory. Its leading practitioner is Eric Hobsbawm. Other examples are found in the work of Victor Kiernan and F.S. Neale.⁴⁶

3) *Marxist Historical Sociology*

This is explicitly theoretical and comparative and studies the history of structures with little attention to the details of ordinary individuals and everyday events. This is probably the major form of Marxist social science but, like the two former approaches, it is not dogmatically wedded to Marxism, drawing on theories from other traditions as well.⁴⁷ It has many well-known practitioners, including Barrington Moore, Rodney Hilton, Perry Anderson, Theda Skocpol, Robert Brenner, and Geoffrey de Ste Croix.⁴⁸

and methodologically reflective of this group and the ascription of "Marxist" to his work is now problematic because it is little in evidence in his recent writings, although his work of the 1940s and 50s is much more obviously so. Some of his extensive writings are listed in the Bibliography.

Edward Thompson has been very interested in theoretical and methodological questions. See the Bibliography for some of his main works of theory, methodology, and empirical history. The work of Raymond Williams has been essentially concerned with the social history of culture and problems of historical materialist methodology. See the works listed in the Bibliography.

⁴⁶ Hobsbawm's scholarly interests are legion and his output is vast. He has written extensively on Marxist historical theory and methodology, including some classic essays, such as 'Karl Marx's Contribution to Historiography' (1963), 'From Social History to the History of Society' (1971), 'The Contribution of History to Social Science' (1981), and 'Marx and History' (1984). His major works of totalising Marxist history are the trilogy *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *The Age of Capital* (1975), and *The Age of Empire* (1987). For a penetrating overview of Hobsbawm's work see E.D. Genovese, 'The Politics of Class Struggle in the History of Society: An Appraisal of the Work of Eric Hobsbawm' (1984). The Bibliography also contains references to the work of Kiernan and Neale.

⁴⁷ The methodologies of some Marxist and other historical sociologists are discussed by the editor and contributors to T. Skocpol (ed), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*; (1984); R. Bendix, *Force, Fate, and Freedom: On Historical Sociology* (1984); H. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (1984); R. Johnson, 'Barrington Moore, Perry Anderson and English Social Development' (1976); P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (1982)

⁴⁸ Examples include B. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1967) and *Inequality: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (1978); R. Hilton, *A Medieval Society* (1966), *Bond Men Made Free* (1973), *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (1975), and 'Feudalism in Europe: Problems for Historians' (1984); P. Anderson, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974), *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974); T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (1979); R. Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe'

Unlike the structuralist Marxists, with whom they share some important concepts, these people give a central place to the structuring activities of powerful individuals, groups, and classes of people. They do not see the social totality as being a systemic whole that strongly determines the activities of all those within it. In fact, all three of these streams of Marxism reject economic reductionism, or what is known as "vulgar Marxism", but they do more or less subscribe to the central idea of historical materialism that the social "base", however it is defined, has causal primacy in the long-run history of society.

4) *Weberian Historical Sociology*

This approach, like its Marxist counterpart with which it shares a good deal, is highly theoretical and comparative. But there is also a lot of theoretical diversity, reflecting Weber's ambiguous legacy -- a legacy perhaps even more ambiguous than Marx's. Those influenced by Weber are even less tightly integrated as a group than the Marxists and less "loyal" to his ideas. As can be seen from the thematic variability of the work of Reinhard Bendix, S.N. Eisenstadt, Clifford Geertz, Ernest Gellner, John A. Hall, Michael Mann, Albert Hirschman, and Benjamin Nelson,⁴⁹ for example, those influenced by Weber disagree about the degree of objectivity of social structures and the precise role of material, cultural, and ideological influences in social change. Contrary to popular opinion, it is even possible to be a Weberian historical materialist, a position that has considerable textual support in some of Weber's historical writings, such as *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*. What their works tend to have in common is Weber's emphasis upon reconciling the objectivity of structure and sociological enquiry with the subjectivity of structuring action and the enquirer's point of view.

5) *The Historical Sociology of Norbert Elias*

Elias drew upon some Comtean, Marxist, and Weberian themes to construct his figurational approach.⁵⁰ But he was opposed to constructing ideal typical categories of the Weberian sort, preferring the role of theory to be that of inductively developed

(1976), 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism' (1977), and 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism' (1982); G. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981).

⁴⁹ For methodological discussions see again Skocpol, *Vision and Method*; Bendix, *Force, Fate, and Freedom* (1984); and Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (1982). Examples of the works of R. Bendix, S.N. Eisenstadt, C. Geertz, E. Gellner, J.A. Hall, M. Mann, A. Hirschman, and B. Nelson are listed in the Bibliography.

⁵⁰ See the Bibliography for some of Elias' main works in English.

generalisations from comparisons of social figurations, something he believed historians generally failed to develop.

6) *The Action Sociology of Alain Touraine*

The methodology that Touraine and his group advocate is similar to that of Giddens and Abrams in that it emphasises the dialectic between action and structure,⁵¹ but unlike Giddens he has actively pursued empirical research (in collaboration with others), in his case into the origins, structures, and activities of contemporary new social movements by actually taking part in the movements themselves.⁵² Touraine's sociology of action is really historical sociology or social history of the present, but of course historians cannot normally participate in the activities of the people they study. Philip Abrams also did similar work.⁵³ Their research serves to remind us that any distinction between past- and present-oriented enquiries is methodologically unwarranted.

In the following chapter I shall support my contention that structuralism is employed by many contemporary historians by examining in more detail the work of some structural historians who employ versions of the methodology.

⁵¹ See A. Touraine, *The Self-Production of Society* (1977) and *The Voice and The Eye* (1981).

⁵² For example, A. Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform* (1971), *Solidarity: Poland 1980-81* (1983), *Anti-Nuclear Protest: The Opposition to Nuclear Energy in France* (1983).

⁵³ P. Abrams *et al.*, *Communes, Sociology, and Society* (1976).