

CHAPTER 3

Materialism and Society

This chapter discusses the materialist analysis of society. Foundational questions of a materialist theory of society include those about the relationship of subject and object (section 3.1), the relationship of freedom and necessity (3.2), the forces and relations that shape human production (3.3), the relationship of economy and society (3.4), and the characteristics of modern society (3.5).

3.1. Subject and Object

Structuralism stresses how the mode of production, institutions, power, the state, ideology, and other structures determine, limit, and (re)produce the human being as subject, i.e. their thoughts and activities so that the human being is the bearer of structures that fulfil certain functions in society. Action- and practice-oriented approaches argue in contrast that humans as active beings produce, change, and reproduce society and its structures, whereby they make history. In classical sociology, the difference of these two approaches becomes evident in the approaches of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, action theory and structuralism/functionalism. Whereas Weber stresses that society is a complex of humans' social actions¹, Durkheim argues that social facts exist independent of the individual and exert external coercion on humans.²

Sociologists such as Anthony Giddens³ boast that their approaches overcome the gap between action theory and structuralism. But this gap had already been

¹ Max Weber. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

² Émile Durkheim. 1982. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: The Free Press.

³ Anthony Giddens. 1986. *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity.

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overcome by Marx's dialectic. Marx wrote in 1844 in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*: 'just as society itself produces man, so is society produced by him'.⁴ The theory and philosophy that goes back to Marx is based on the dialectic of subject and object.

The starting point of the analysis of society is 'the existence of living human individuals'⁵, who produce 'their material life'⁶ in social relations in society. Society is a complex of production, which humans produce in social relations. What is matter in society, i.e. the organisation of matter in the realm of humans and society? Karl Marx gives an answer in *The German Ideology's* chapter on Feuerbach.⁷ Society's materiality is production's sociality and societal character. Humans produce in society.

Society and Social Production

Marx says that society is a complex, in which humans produce the means for the satisfaction of their needs.⁸ In society, humans produce the means required to 'sustain human life'.⁹ 'But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things'.¹⁰ A materialist approach to society does not mean that society is only about the production of food and drink. Rather, life, survival, and good life involve also 'various other things' such as friendship, love, politics, culture, engagement with others, etc. The decisive factor is that society is a complex in which humans consciously produce their life in a social and societal manner, i.e. in relation to each other. Production in society also involves the 'production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness'.¹¹ That ideas are 'interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men'¹² does not mean that the economy determines thinking, but rather that humans produce ideas in societal relations that in class societies are relations of domination. Consciousness and communication are embedded into societal relations that as a medium form 'the language of real life'.¹³ Societal relations mediate the production of diverse structures.

⁴ *MECW Volume 3*, p. 298.

⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. 1845/46. *The German Ideology*, *MECW Volume 5*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ *MECW Volume 5*, pp. 27–96.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

In bourgeois sociology, Max Weber defined a social relationship as ‘the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms.’¹⁴ But this insight was not new. Marx had already pointed out that the human world is made of societal relationships. In his critique of capitalism’s political economy, Marx at the same time worked out a general sociology. In capitalism and society in general, everything exists in and through societal relations. The commodity, capital, labour, money, value, classes, exploitation, domination, capitalism, struggles, socialism, etc. are societal relations. So for example, Marx writes in *Capital* that ‘capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things,’¹⁵ value is ‘something purely soci[et]al,’¹⁶ and that the ‘relative value-form of a commodity [...] conceals a soci[et]al relation.’¹⁷

Marx wrote in 1845 in his sixth ‘Thesis on Feuerbach’ that the ‘essence of man is [...] the ensemble of the soci[et]al relations.’¹⁸ In their everyday life, humans constantly enter into relations, they live in and through social relations that produce and reproduce society. Society is the totality of social relations between humans. Social systems are smaller totalities of social relations. They are connected via humans’ social roles, relations, and activities. Humans’ social relations are always societal relations because every human practice produces society as totality and society conditions and influences our thinking and practices.

Social relations can be ephemeral and transient, but can also become structures. A structure is a regularised social relation that through repetition and repeatability has continuity and a certain stability in space and time. Structures are not the spontaneous result of one-time actions, but can only emerge from continuous and repeated practices in particular spaces at particular times. Structures are the recursive result of human practices: In their social relations,

¹⁴ Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 26.

¹⁵ Karl Marx. 1867/1976. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin. p. 932.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149. Note that Marx frequently in his original German writings speaks of ‘gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse’, a term that has often been translated as ‘social relations’, although ‘societal relations’ is more precise. Whereas social relations are a micro-sociological phenomenon, societal relations are macro-sociological, focused on the totality of society, and are totalities of many social relations. When Marx in the German original speaks of ‘gesellschaftlich’ and the translation says ‘social’ instead of ‘societal’, I use the expression ‘soci[et]al’ in order to indicate that the translation is imprecise and that ‘societal’ is a better translation than ‘social’.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁸ *MECW Volume 5*, pp. 4 & 7.

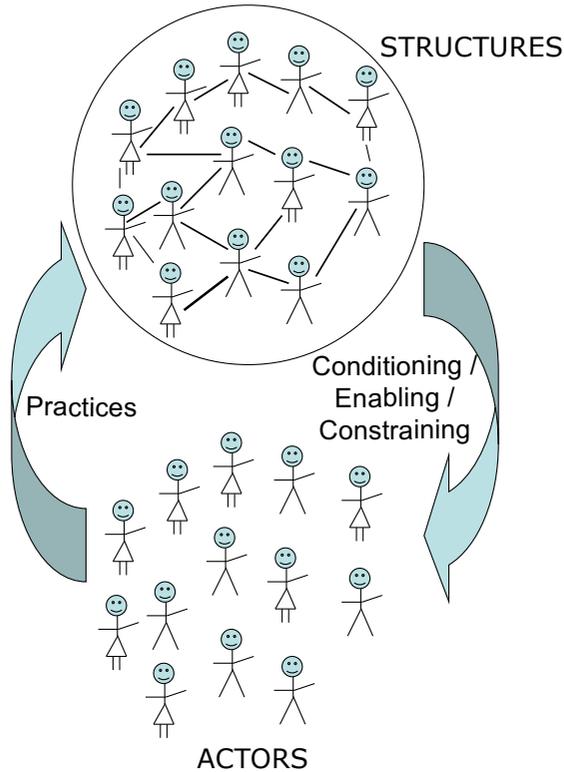


Figure 3.1: The dialectic of structures and practices.

humans produce and reproduce structures that condition, enable, and constrain further practices. Practices produce and reproduce structures that enable further practices that again reproduce structures, etc. In society, we find a dialectic of structures and practices, objects and subjects. Figure 3.1 visualises this dialectic. A social system is a complex of social relations that has spatial, temporal and membership boundaries. If important social relations that constitute a social system break down, the system comes to an end. Every social system is an ensemble of social relations organised in society. Society is a totality of social systems and at the same time also a totality of societal and social relations. Therefore, it is also a totality of human practices.

Human Beings as Species-Being

Marx calls the human being a species-being because it produces consciously in order to satisfy its needs ('free, conscious activity is man's species-character'¹⁹).

¹⁹ Karl Marx. 1844. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. In *MECW Volume 3*, p. 276.

In this production, humans enter a metabolism with nature and engage with other humans. That the human being is a species-being means that it is a natural, sensual, social, societal, producing being. Existing as a species-being also entails that humans are thinking and communicating beings because production, thought, and communication can only exist in humans' common practices: 'In his *consciousness of species* man confirms his real *social life* and simply repeats his real existence in thought, just as conversely the being of the species confirms itself in species consciousness and exists for itself in its generality as a thinking being.'²⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach stresses that language and communication are part of the human species' essence: 'Language is nothing other than the *realization of the species*; i.e. the "I" is mediated with the "You" in order, by eliminating their individual separateness, to manifest the unity of the species.'²¹

To talk about human species-being means to assert that there is a certain universal essence of all human beings. All humans are social, societal and producing beings. Communication is part of production and at the same time goes beyond it. Humans produce social relations through communication (productive communication) and communicate in production. Constructivists frequently challenge any claim to universalism and human essence with the argument that universalism is often false universalism that excludes certain groups from being human or by stressing that human lives are different, contextual, local, incomparable and that any universalising claim disregards the differences of human needs and living situations. Martha Nussbaum warns that constructivism can easily result in an 'extreme relativism'²² that justifies inequalities, oppression and exploitation in the name of anti-universalism, anti-essentialism, and difference. Scott Meikle argues that Louis Althusser has had a profound influence on the rise of contemporary anti-essentialism. Anti-essentialist relativism 'has been reproduced in all the sub-Althusserian vogues that have each had their moments [...] since the 1960s.'²³ Nussbaum defends Aristotelian essentialism by arguing that basic human capabilities that define basic human needs form human essence. Human capabilities such as the ability and need for love, good health, a complete and good life, to live for and with others, etc. form a unity of diversity among human beings. They are universal needs and capabilities that take on different forms in different contexts.

The relationship of freedom to necessity is an important foundational question of social analysis. The next section focuses on this issue.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 299.

²¹ Ludwig Feuerbach. 1839. *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*. In *Ludwig Feuerbach: The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, 53–96. London: Verso. p. 63

²² Martha Nussbaum. 1992. Human Functioning and Social Justice. In *Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism*. *Political Theory* 20 (2): 202–246. p. 205.

²³ Scott Meikle. 1985. *Existentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*. London: Duckworth. p. 8.

3.2. Freedom and Necessity

The approach of structuralist determinism assumes that economic or other structures necessarily lead humans to act in certain ways (such as bringing about revolutions) or necessarily result in the collapse of social systems. Voluntarist individualism assumes in contrast that humans are absolutely free, exist free from coercion, and can achieve anything they want to independent of society's structures. The first approach fetishises necessity, the second one freedom, spontaneity, and chance.

Georg Lukács criticises these approaches as constituting the 'bourgeois dilemma of voluntarism and fatalism',²⁴ in which they form 'necessarily complementary opposites'²⁵ of bourgeois thought. Structuralism fetishises necessity up to the level of mechanistic determinism, where humans have no freedom of action at all and no choices. Such approaches assume that humans are a hundred percent caught as character masks in pre-programmed modes of action. Voluntarism, in contrast, reduces society to the individual. It has an individualistic understanding of society, in which change is purely spontaneous and almost all changes are possible at any time. Lukács argues instead for a non-fatalistic and non-economistic theory²⁶ that is neither voluntarist nor individualistic. Such a theory must be based on the dialectics of subject/object, individual/society, politics/economy, practices/structures, chance/necessity.

Marx formulated such an approach in his work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he writes that humans 'make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'.²⁷ Lenin applied this insight of Marx to the question of how and when fundamental change occurs in society: 'It is only when the "lower classes" do not want to live in the old way and the "upper classes" cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nation-wide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters)'.²⁸ Structural crises shape the conditions of political practices. It is determined that there are certain reactions to crises in society. It is, however, undetermined whether or not the emergence of emancipatory political movements is part of these reactions to crisis. It is also not determined whether or not social struggles from below can be organised

²⁴ Georg Lukács. 1923/1971. *History and Class Consciousness*. London: Merlin Press. p. 322.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

²⁷ *MECW Volume 11*, p. 103.

²⁸ Vladimir I. Lenin. 1920. 'Left-Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder. In *Lenin Collected Works Volume 31*. Moscow: Progress. p. 85.

and critical consciousness emerge. For such developments to occur, the crisis must put the necessity of change on the political agenda (one ‘cannot carry on in the old way’); and in such a situation, the oppressed must *want* fundamental change (they ‘do not want to live in the old way’). Only then can emancipatory political practices (*praxis*) emerge.

The dialectic of subject and object constitutes the processual ontology of society and history. Structures (such as capital, markets, the state, ideologies, etc.) influence and condition human practices, whereby structures are produced and reproduced. Crises open up historical possibilities for fundamental changes of society, but it is not determined whether such changes will occur or how exactly they will look and develop. Such questions depend on whether the oppressed classes and groups develop collective critical consciousness, organise themselves politically, conduct class struggles and can assert themselves against countervailing political forces (such as ideological, psychological, structural/physical and state repression). A historically novel form of society emerges from crises, in which revolutionary praxis asserts itself against conservative forces.

Human self-consciousness enables freedom in necessity, i.e. human possibilities and options for action under conditions that are not self-chosen. Conscious human action enables a certain space of possibilities and is an aspect of relative chance.

Herbert Marcuse argues that capitalism’s objective dialectic exists in the development of crises from structural contradictions. He says that in such situations, humans determine their own future and can make and write history by collective political praxis, which constitutes the societal dialectic’s subjective dimension: “The negativity and its negation are two different phases of the same historical process, straddled by man’s historical action. The “new” state is the truth of the old, but that truth does not steadily and automatically grow out of the earlier state; it can be set free only by an autonomous act on the part of men, that will cancel the whole of the existing negative state.²⁹ Necessity takes place ‘only through societal praxis.’³⁰

Capitalism’s development and contradictions constitute a space of possibilities for the future development of society. In a crisis, the question becomes topical what the future should look like and what positive content (what Hegel terms ‘determinate negation’) shall be realised in the negation of the negation. The potential options for the future development of society are never realised with necessity and automatically. They depend on human praxis. Freedom is comprehended and realised necessity, the insight of having

²⁹ Herbert Marcuse. 1941. *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. New York: Humanity Books. p. 315.

³⁰ Translation from German: Herbert Marcuse. *Zur Geschichte der Dialektik*. In *Schriften Band 8*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. p. 224.

to act because there is the need for change. Ideological, structural and direct repression can limit and obstruct freedom, whereby alternatives are oppressed. But no matter how hopeless the situation seems to be, determinate negation, i.e. praxis in the midst of and against oppression always remains possible as the perspective for freedom.

Because society is a human complex of production, the concept of production needs to be further specified, which leads us to the notions of the relations of production and the productive forces.

3.3. The Relations of Production and the Productive Forces

Humans create products that satisfy their needs in social relations. They utilise their bodily and mental capacities that they develop through education. These capacities constitute the human being's production capacity. In the work process, these forces of the subject organise and utilise means of production – instruments and resources – in order to create new products to satisfy human needs. The human production capacity is the major productive force. It is supported by the human utilisation of organised natural forces (science, technology) in society and purely societal forces (methods of production, practical knowledge, work organisation, the mode of regulation, the culture of work).

The mode of production is 'a definite form of activity' of individuals, 'a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce.³¹ The system of the productive forces is a process, in which producing subjects work with objects of production. Humans do not produce alone, but only based on and in social and societal relations. The human being is not, like Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, a lonely producing being, but rather, like Robert Tressell's Frank Owen,³² a socially and societally producing being that creates sociality and society. The productive forces are relations of production between humans, between humans and nature, and between humans and the means of production. The relations of production are social forces that organise the human production capacity and the means of production in the production process. Figure 3.2 shows the mode of production as the dialectic of the relations of production and the productive forces.

In capitalism, the mode of production is a relation between the organisational forms of capital, labour, and technology (productive forces) and the class relations, i.e. the capital-labour-relation. The class relations are societal

³¹ MECW Volume 5, pp. 31–32.

³² See: Robert Tressell. 1914/2012. *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. London: Wordsworth.

Productive forces		Relations of production
<p>Subject, production power/capacities: Physical and mental capacities (production capacity) Means of subsistence/reproduction: individual, social, institutional</p> <p>Object, means of production: Instruments of work: Body, brain, tools, machines, space-time Objects of work: Natural, industrial and informational resources</p> <p>Subject-object, products of work: Natural products Industrial products Services Informational products</p>		<p>Mode of ownership: Production power/capacities, means of production, products of work</p> <p>Mode of coercion: None Physical violence Structural repression Ideological and psychological repression</p> <p>Mode of allocation and distribution: To each according to his/her needs, Exchange Exchange for achieving exchange-value, Exchange for maximization of exchange-value, Exchange for capital accumulation</p> <p>Division of labour (DL): None (well-rounded individual) Housework/wage labour, gender-specific DL, physical/mental labour, generalists/specialists, politics: citizens/politicians, town/countryside, international DL</p>

Figure 3.2: Dimensions of the productive forces and the relations of production.

relations that define who controls the ownership of the means of production and society's products and holds the power to make other groups produce goods and surplus products that are not owned by the immediate producers, but by the owning class. Class relations are a relation between a propertied and a propertyless class, in which the propertyless class is compelled to produce surplus products and surplus value for the propertied class.

The relations of production shape the mode of ownership that defines who owns and controls labour power, the means of production and the products to which degree (all parts, certain parts, no part), and who controls the mode

Table 3.1: The main forms of ownership in different modes of production.

	Owner of labour power	Owner of the means of production	Owner of the products of labour
Patriarchy	Patriarch	Patriarch	Family
Slavery	Slave master	Slave master	Slave master
Feudalism	Partly self-control, partly lord	Partly self-control, partly lord	Partly self-control, partly lord
Capitalism	Worker (owns but has to sell labour power)	Capitalist	Capitalist
Communism	Self	All (Workers' self-management)	Partly all, partly individual

of coercion that defends the relations of production, the mode of distribution that defines how products are distributed in society, and the division of labour. Class relations are relations of control and power that define who controls the means of production, the organisation of work, the products, distribution, politics and influential institutions.

Every economy produces a certain amount of goods per year. If there are no crises and the economy is oriented toward growth, then there will be a surplus product at the end of the year. The mode of ownership is the legal basis that defines who owns economic resources and the surplus product. Table 3.1 provides an overview of various modes of production (patriarchy, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, communism) that are based on particular forms of ownership and class relations.

The mode of coercion entails all practices, relations, structures, and institutions that aim at making humans accept domination and make them act in relations of domination. Methods used include physical repression (overseers, security forces, military, police), structural repression (markets, wage labour, legal protection of private ownership, etc.) and cultural repression (psychological repression that operates with fear, ideological repression that legitimates the existing order by making use of scapegoating and manipulation and thereby tries to distract from the real causes of society's problems and prevent societal changes). A free society does not need a mode of coercion.

The mode of allocation and distribution defines how goods are allocated and distributed. In a socialist society, each individual receives what s/he needs in order to satisfy his/her needs and lead a good life. In class societies, exchange regulates distribution: A certain amount of one product is exchanged for a certain amount of another product or for a particular amount of money. If you own nothing in an exchange-based society, then you cannot obtain goods and services. An exception are those products that are not traded, but are rather freely available. The wage-worker only possesses labour power and is therefore

compelled to sell this power on the labour market in order to survive. There are different ways of how exchange can be organised: general exchange without exchange-value, exchange in order to yield exchange-value (x commodity A = y commodity B), exchange for maximising exchange-value, and exchange for capital accumulation.

The division of labour defines who conducts what labour in the household, the economy, politics, and culture. Historically, the first divisions of labour were age- and gender-based. There was also a division of labour between hunters and gatherers. Later, the division between manual and mental labour, the division between housework and wage-labour, the division between planning and executing activities (management and labour), specialisation, the regional division of labour between towns and the countryside, and (in the context of the globalisation of production and imperialism) the international division of labour emerged. The emergence and development of the division of labour accompanies the development of class society. A free society is a society without classes that is technologically highly developed and enables the sublation of the division of labour. As a consequence, humans are universally active and well-rounded individuals, live in general wealth and control the means of production collectively.

In capitalism, the productive forces stand in antagonism to the relations of production so that technological development creates the foundations of new forms of co-operation and co-operative ownership. But under the conditions of class relations, these developments result in ever newer forms of exploitation and precarious life. Only the transition to a post-capitalist mode of production can mitigate the antagonism.

A new mode of production sublates preceding modes. The latter are not fully eliminated, but can continue to exist within, shape, and be shaped by the new mode of production. For example, patriarchy and slavery are older than capitalism, but have continued to exist within capitalism in the form of the household economy that reproduces labour power and in the international division of labour.

The development of the productive forces takes place in the form of dialectical sublation. So, it includes a) lifting up, b) elimination, and c) preservation:

- a) new qualities of the economy emerge;
- b) aspects of the old mode of production disappear;
- c) old modes of production continue to exist in the new mode of production and interact with the latter in particular forms.

Sublation can be more or less radical. The transition from capitalism to socialism means fundamental change. The question, however, is in this context whether such a transition is possible immediately. In the transition to a different mode of production, elimination and preservation can take on different degrees and are variable. There is no linear development of modes of production. New modes of

production can contain elements of old ones, dominance shifts are possible, in which a subordinated mode of production becomes dominant, etc.

The Role of the Body and the Mind in the Mode of Production

Means of production include the human body, the mind, mechanical technologies, complex machine systems, and combinations thereof. Particular organisational forms of space and time (i.e. production locales and production locations) are also means of production, at which and where production takes place at particular times. Necessary working time is the total working time required in a society to create the products needed for the life of a human. It depends on the development of the productive forces, i.e. the level of productivity. A particular sum of working hours is necessary per year in order to guarantee the existence and reproduction of society and humans. The production objects and products can be natural products (basic products), industrial products, services, information products, or combinations of these.

The productive forces are a system of production that creates goods and services that satisfy human needs. There are various modes of organising the productive forces, namely the agricultural productive forces, the industrial productive forces, and the informational productive forces (see table 3.2).

The human subject has a capacity for production that develops and depends on physical and mental skills. The interaction of the mental and the bodily capacities constitutes the human productive force. Reproductive work is work that sustains and reproduces human existence. It creates and organises the means of subsistence that humans need in order to survive. The means of subsistence are the means that humans require in order to live and satisfy their needs.

In capitalism, reproductive labour is to the largest degree and mostly unpaid. It reproduces wage labour, whereby the value of labour power and parts of commodities' value are created. Capital exploits reproductive labour as a free resource. The production of the means of subsistence takes place on three interacting levels of organisation: the individual, the social, and the institutional.

Table 3.2: Three modes of the organisation of the productive forces.

Mode	Instruments of work	Objects of work	Products of work
Agricultural productive forces	Body, brain, tools, machines	Nature	Basic products
Industrial productive forces	Body, brain, tools, machines	Basic products, industrial products	Industrial products
Informational productive forces	Body, brain, tools, machines	Experiences, ideas	Informational products

Table 3.3: Human needs and the means of subsistence.

	Mind and culture		Body and nature
Institutional needs	Educational institutions, health and medical care, research institutions, media, arts, leisure organisations, political organisations, associations		Health and medical care, workplace, organisations that enable bodily movement
Social needs	Social relations, communication, language, love, friendships, cooperation, care		Procreation, sexual relations, cooperation
Individual needs	Mental engagement, affects, knowledge, skills, creativity, mental health, self-esteem, self-respect, beauty, self-actualization, values, morals, purpose, meaning of life		Food, water, air, shelter, sleep, rest, affects, sexuality, bodily health, warmth

The human being has individual, social and institutional needs. Table 3.3 illustrates the means of subsistence that satisfy particular human needs.

The means of subsistence shown in table 3.3 are on the one hand (in the table's rows) ordered by the distinction between individual, social and institutional needs. On the other hand, they are organised (in the table's columns) based on the question of whether they are primarily oriented on nature and the body or culture and the mind. These two aspects cannot be strictly separated. Mind and body interact in the satisfaction of all needs and the production of all goods. But one can determine whether a particular product or activity has primarily a bodily or mental character. The human being requires the whole body, including the brain, in order to communicate. The brain is a special physical region of the body. But in communication, the uttered contents of consciousness are decisive, which is why communication can be classified as primarily a mental (but nonetheless material) phenomenon. The arrows in the table indicate that the single dimensions do not exist separately, but extend into each other and interact with each other. There are dialectics of mind and body, individual and group, groups and institutions, individuals and institutions.

Although the body and the mind as well as the organisational levels of the human being (the individual, the group/organisation, institutions, society) are to a certain degree independent, they also belong together. They cannot exist separately, constitute each other mutually, and thereby also each have a relatively

independent existence. In physical activity such as gardening, the human being combines creative thinking (about how the plants should be positioned, etc.) with bodily movement and physical effort. The condition and development of the garden is the occasion for the gardener's reflection on what improvements should be undertaken. The practical realisation of these reflections results in the physical differentiation of the garden's form.

The organisation of the satisfaction of needs takes place based on particular modes of production (see table 3.1). In modern society, capitalism is the dominant mode of production for the organisation of the satisfaction of needs. But patriarchy and individualistic, communal, public and civil society forms of organisation also play important roles. As part of the neoliberal mode of regulation that has since the 1970s become the dominant form of how capitalism is regulated, ever more realms of society, means of subsistence, and realms of reproduction have become shaped by the logic of the commodity and capital accumulation. Private ownership and capitalist control have become ever more dominant and resulted in accumulation by dispossession.³³ The separation of the body and the mind is an integral feature of the capitalist mode of production. It helps to organise the division of labour and the gap between management and labour, mental and physical labour, agriculture/industry/the informational economy, the town and the countryside. The separation of body and mind has traditionally also been important in the patriarchal, gender-specific division of labour. The dualism of body and mind plays a role in the legitimation of unequal power. Power relations deform and tend to destroy the dialectic of body and mind. Socialism is, among other things, also the dialectical reconciliation of the body and the mind.

Based on the philosophical foundations of economic analysis outlined in sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, we can in the next section discuss the relationship between the economy and society.

3.4. Economy and Society

Society

Certain Marxist theories describe culture, ideas, communication, information, knowledge, morals, and ideologies as parts of an immaterial superstructure that rests spatially on a material, economic base. It is also said that the superstructure started to temporally exist after the base. These assumptions can be explained by the fact that one wants to avoid the mistake of idealist philosophy and theory that explain the world as mental and hypostasise the world of ideas and

³³ See: David Harvey. 2003. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. David Harvey. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

consciousness as a sufficient factor for society's changes. But one thereby underestimates the realms of culture and politics.³⁴ The base/superstructure model is static and often reductionist: It explains changes purely economically. But bourgeois counter-models (such as postmodern theory or systems theory) are also flawed: They declare that culture or politics forms society's super-system. The effect is that the role of the economy, classes, and labour in society is disregarded or downplayed. Such approaches often also provide a multi-factor analysis that postulates that all subsystems of society are equally important. Such an analysis is often presented as being 'complex' and 'non-reductionist'. However, the problem is that this approach cannot adequately ground society, and offers a dualist analysis in which society's parts are independent. This approach cannot explain what the common logic of modern society's moments is because it utilises the logic of diversity without unity that disregards the Principle of Sufficient Reason. It is crucial to neither underestimate nor overestimate the role of the economy in society. The base/superstructure problem poses the question of how non-economic realms and the economy are related. Marxist theory's strength is that it makes us aware of the importance of talking about the economy whenever we speak of politics and culture, and vice versa.

As one of the starting points of a critical theory of society, one can discern three interconnected and overgrasping (*übergreifend*) organisational levels and subsystems of society:

- The economy: The economy is a system in which humans in particular relations of production create use-values that satisfy human needs.
- Politics: In the political system, humans take collective decisions that govern and regulate society.
- Culture: Culture is the system whereby the human being is reproduced, which entails the reproduction of mind and body. 'Culture means the domain of social subjectivity – a domain which is wider than ideology but narrower than society, less palpable than the economy but more tangible than Theory.'³⁵ In the cultural system, humans make meaning of the world and develop their minds, bodies, and identities. Therefore, culture includes, for example, the educational system, medicine, psychology, science, the media system, sports activities, exhibitions, cycling, playing chess, eating, cooking, restaurants, playing an instrument, painting a picture, attending a

³⁴ For a critique of reductionist versions of the base/superstructure-model and an alternative, cultural-materialist approach, see: Raymond Williams. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Christian Fuchs. 2017. Raymond Williams' Communicative Materialism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (6): 744–762. Christian Fuchs, 2015. *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*. New York: Routledge.

³⁵ Terry Eagleton. 2000. *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell. p. 39.

concert or football game, the architecture of a church and the practices of praying conducted in it; love, friendship and family as affectual practices and relations, morals, norms and ethics, etc. Culture is not just focused on the mind, thoughts, and ideas. It is at the same time about the engagement of the body and the mind.

Economy and Society

The philosopher Wolfgang Hofkirchner has conceptualised a stage model that explains the logic of how reality's organisational levels are connected. In a stage model, 'one step taken by a system in question – that produces a layer – depends on the stage taken prior to that but cannot be reversed! [...] layers – that are produced by steps – build upon layers below them but cannot be reduced to them!³⁶. Emergence is the principle underlying a stage model:³⁷ Matter's organisational levels have emergent qualities, which means that the systems that organise themselves on a certain level are more than the sum of their parts, to which they cannot be reduced. Thus, an organisational level has new qualities that are based on the underlying levels, moments, and systems. A new organisational level of matter sublates underlying levels in the Hegelian sense of sublation as the unity of (a) uplifting, (b) preservation, and (c) elimination. The synergies of the moments of one organisational level result in the emergence of a new level that (a) has new, non-reduceable qualities, (b) means that specific qualities of the underlying levels are also present on the new level, where they are preserved, and (c) ensures that the new level feeds back onto the underlying levels so that

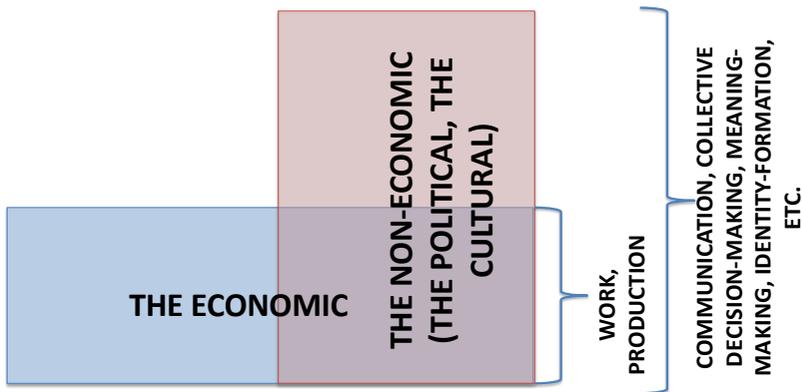


Figure 3.3: The relationship of the economic and the non-economic in society.

³⁶ Wolfgang Hofkirchner. 2013. *Emergent Information. A Unified Theory of Information Framework*. Singapore: World Scientific. pp. 123–124.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

they change and differentiate themselves so that their old state is eliminated. Figure 3.3 shows how the stage model's dialectical logic can be applied to explain the relation of the economic and the non-economic in society.

The non-economic is defined negatively by the fact that it doesn't only satisfy human needs. Formulated in a positive manner this means that politics and culture constitute the non-economic realm. In this realm, humans take collective decisions (politics) and interpret society and themselves (culture). It would, however, be a false conclusion if one separated politics and culture from the economy. The economy is the underlying organisational level sublated in politics and culture. Just like in the economy, we also find production and work in politics and culture, whereby the economic moment exists in culture and politics. But political and cultural production have emergent qualities. They are complexes of production with special qualities: In politics, humans produce collective decisions, whereby society is capable of acting. In culture, humans produce meanings as well as definitions of the self, whereby society and humans form identities. Collective decisions and identities are use-values, but use-values that have special, emergent qualities. Democracy as a political phenomenon and recognition as a cultural phenomenon are neither purely non-economic nor purely economic. Political and cultural moments are at the same time economic and non-economic: Production in society constitutes the universal moment of society, it creates society as totality. Production specialises itself in each realm of society and there takes on emergent qualities, such as the production of the public in politics and the production of identity in culture, two phenomena that have emergent qualities that are based on and at the same time go beyond the economy.

The passing of laws in parliaments is a form of production where we find not just the labour of parliamentarians, but also the labour of civil society organisations that oppose and protest against certain directions a law can take, the labour of consultants, researchers, party officials, administrators, archivists, PR professionals, etc.. A newspaper is a cultural artefact that offers and proposes certain interpretations of the world to citizens. Its reports offer an occasion for communication and reflection on the state of the world. In the production of a newspaper, we find the labour of journalists, printers, editors, designers, advertising and PR professionals, web designers, web programmers, social media experts, etc.

The law as political artefact and the newspaper as cultural artefact do not just have an economic aspect of work and production, but also emergent qualities that go beyond the economy and constitute particular roles in society. The law takes on the role of regulating human life in society according to particular rules. The newspaper has the role of informing humans about new developments in society ('news'). These are positive definitions that should not lead us to lose track of the fact that no complex of society is independent of real power structures. In societies that are shaped by domination and class structures, organisational levels as well as their complexes (subsystems) and organisations can play negative roles. For example, the law in a fascist state legitimates

racism and the extermination of political opponents. Or think of a racist capitalist tabloid that conducts disinformation by simplification, scandalisation, manipulation, right-wing propaganda, and agitation.

The materialist concept of social and societal production explodes the base/superstructure model that separates the economy from the non-economic. Materialism shows that the economic and the non-economic reach into each other and are shaped by the logic of production that is modelled on the form of human work as the general practice and model that creates the unity of society as dialectical totality.

But what is the role of communication in society? Communication is the social process of symbolic interaction through which various actors come together and enter relations in the production and use of objects (i.e. artefacts and social structures). In the production of use-values, humans co-ordinate themselves via communication processes. Also the use and application of these use-values is co-ordinated by communication.

Let us consider an example: Someone eats a meal prepared in a restaurant. The process of eating is a bodily activity that serves the human need of nourishment. If eating is organised as a social event, then it poses the possibility for socialising with friends, family, colleagues, etc. through communication at the occasion of a joint meal. The selection of the restaurant and the particular food and drinks chosen, as well as the clothes we wear at a dinner, have a symbolic character. These practices are symbols that communicate something about our status, our class membership, and our self-understanding and that thereby produce cultural distinctions.³⁸ Food is an object that nature and humans produce. Eating food not only reproduces the human body, but also sociality, status, reputation, and power. The practice of eating is at the same time biological, bodily, psychological, economic, social, cultural, and political. In the discussed example, communication turns food and drinks into objects that mediate the relation between humans. Since communication is the production of social relations and social systems, it plays an important role in all processes and systems in society.

When speaking of 'economy and society', we do not mean that the economy is not a part of society and that society merely includes politics and culture. Rather, society is a totality that is constituted by humans' economic, cultural and political practices. Production has its origin in the economy, but acts as a moment that creates society as totality. Production is 'the model for any social practice'³⁹ and 'the simplest and most elementary form of those complexes whose dynamic interaction is what constitutes the specificity of social

³⁸ See: Pierre Bourdieu. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

³⁹ Georg Lukács. 1980. *The Ontology of Social Being. 3: Labour*. London: Merlin. p. 3.

practice.⁴⁰ Production's dialectical character 'as model for social practice shows itself precisely in the way that this social practice in its more developed forms exhibits many departures from labour itself'.⁴¹ There is an 'identity of identity and non-identity'⁴² between work and other human practices.

Society's Flow

Society is a totality in which human practices produce and reproduce economic, political and cultural structures, systems and institutions that dialectically reach into each other. Such structures, systems, and institutions in turn condition, influence, enable, and constrain further practices. In Marxist theory, categories such as determination, mediation, typification, representation, illustration, homology, and correspondence have been used to describe the relationship between 'base' and 'superstructure'. But all of these categories separate the economic and the non-economic. Therefore, they are 'not materialist enough'.⁴³

In his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', the structuralist Louis Althusser uses the metaphor of an edifice with different floors in order to describe the relation of base and superstructure.⁴⁴ He says that 'the great theoretical advantage of the Marxist topography, i.e. of the spatial metaphor of the edifice (base and superstructure) is simultaneously that it reveals that questions of determination (or of index of effectivity) are crucial [and] that it reveals that it is the base which in the last instance determines the whole edifice'.⁴⁵ The problem with Althusser's metaphor of the edifice is that it presents society as static and as mechanically programmed by the economy.

Whereas a house is built in an upright position, the steps of the house's staircase necessarily follow a transverse pattern so that one can walk up or down them. In a stage model, each level, for which the staircase is a model, has a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the underlying steps/levels. In contrast, in a house everything depends on the quality of the foundation. Althusser's model of society is reductionist and mechanistic.

The stage model presented in figure 3.3 conceives of society based on dialectical logic as the simultaneous identity and non-identity of moments that reach into each other and form a totality. But the model does not grasp society's

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 59.

⁴² Ibid., p. 59.

⁴³ Raymond Williams. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 97.

⁴⁴ Louis Althusser. 1969. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press. pp. 127–186.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 135–136.

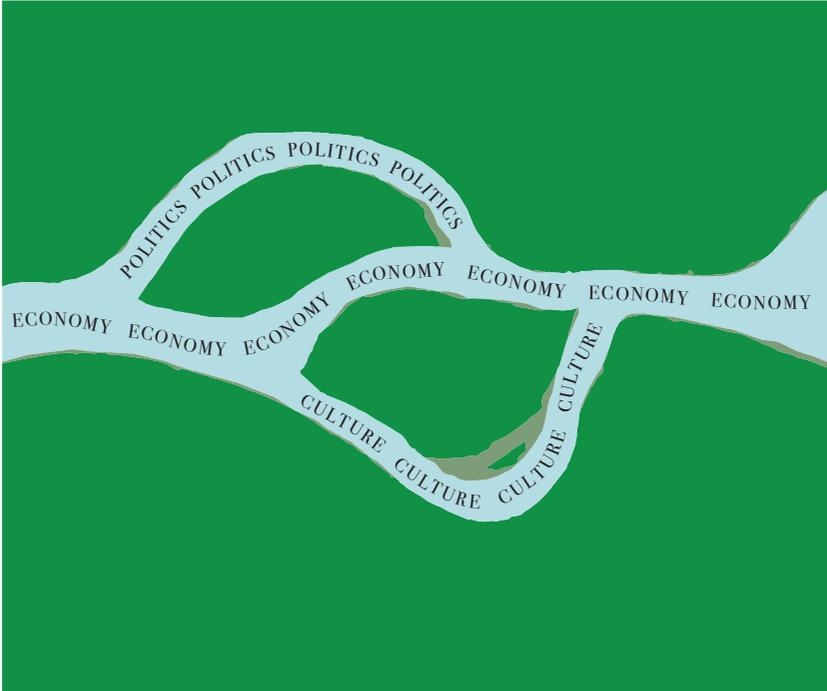


Figure 3.4: The flow of society's development.

dynamics and change. We therefore have to complement it with a flow model (see figure 3.4).

If we conceive of society as a flow, then the economy is the main stream, from which politics and culture branch out as currents that have further spurs (i.e. subsystems) and flow back into the main stream, whose qualities they transform. Politics and culture differentiate themselves from the economy and take on their own flows of development that then flow back into the economy, whose flow they transform. Georg Lukács argues in this context: "This means that if we imagine everyday life as a large river, then science and art [and culture and politics in general, CF] branch out as higher forms of reality's reception and reproduction that differentiate themselves, develop according to their specific aims, reach their pure form in the peculiarity that emerges from societal life's needs in order to then, because of their effects on human life, flow again into the river of everyday life. So, the latter constantly enriches itself with the human mind's highest results that it assimilates to its everyday, practical needs, whereof then again new branches of higher organisational forms emerge as questions and demands."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Translation from German: Georg Lukács. 1963. *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*. 1. Halbband. *Georg Lukács Werke Band 11*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand. p. 13.

The metaphor of the river to represent change is an old philosophical theme. Plato reports in *Cratylus* that Socrates said in a dialogue: ‘Heraclitus says somewhere that “everything gives way and nothing stands fast” and is “likening the things that are to the flowing (*rhoē*) of a river”’.⁴⁷ Aristotle writes in *Metaphysics* that in the ‘Heracleitian writings [...] all perceptible things are always in flux.’⁴⁸ But Aristotle stresses that one must add that change always stands in a dialectical relation to continuity: ‘there is something that persists’ in change;⁴⁹ ‘since a thing that is losing something has some of what it is losing, and a thing must already be something of what it is becoming.’⁵⁰

Lukács sees society as the dynamic flows of everyday life. Society is the life of production, from which alternative currents and rivers flow out and into which they flow back in order to enhance production. He uses the river as a metaphor in order to describe how human production, cultural and political organisations are interconnected. Whereas the building is a purely spatial metaphor for society, the river is a spatio-temporal metaphor.

In dialectical philosophy, the world is contradictory and contradictions produce potentials for change. Lukács’ metaphor of the river for society’s dialectic stresses everyday life’s dynamic character and the networks, processes, and, streams of human production. Rivers branch out and have the capacity to create new spurs, which metaphorically represents the productive and contradictory essence of dialectical processes and human activity in society.

That the economy is the main current of society’s flows means that all of society is constituted by humans’ dynamic, networked, interpenetrating, contradictory realms of production and reproduction. In society, humans produce social and societal relations, use-values, decisions, and meanings. In specific social systems, all of these aspects of production interact with each other in everyday life. Humans not only produce certain structures once, but reproduce them through communication processes, whereby they reproduce the realms of society and society as such. In society, humans produce structures and social relations again and again. They re-produce. Society’s flow is the interaction of humans’ interpenetrating processes of reproduction, whereby humans reproduce society as an open totality.

One must avoid idealising society and its flows. The Danube is no longer the ‘beautiful blue Danube’ that Johann Strauss’ Danube-waltz denotes. Rather, the Danube today is a brown puddle. Rivers are today often polluted, drown the land, or dry up. The polluted river is a metaphor for capitalism and how capitalism endangers and pollutes humans’ everyday life.

Communication is the process of the production of social relations and sociality. Humans do not produce alone, but collectively and in relation to each

⁴⁷ Plato. 1997. *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. § 402a, p. 120.

⁴⁸ Aristotle. 1999. *Metaphysics*. Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press. § 1078b.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, § 1069b.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, § 1010a.

other (which entails that in class societies they produce *against each other*). Everyday life is productive. And this production requires communication in the form of communicative production and the production of communication. In society, there is no communication without production and no production without communication. Communication and work, the social and the economic, are at the same time identical and non-identical.

The dialectic of production and communication exists in the forms of the production of communication and communication in production. The production of communication produces and reproduces social relationships that enable various forms of production. These various forms of production branch out in the flow of everyday life as dialectical spirals through which humans produce new qualities of society that flow into everyday life.

Based on the general foundations of the analysis of society elaborated thus far, the next section introduces a concept of modern society.

3.5. Modern Society

Figure 3.5 displays a model of modern society that is based on the insight that there is a dialectic of structures and practices in society and that society consists of organisational realms and levels that reach into each other. Modern society consists of the spheres of the state, the modern economy, and modern culture that reach into each other. In order to visualise this model in a manner that avoids aesthetic confusion, the cultural realm is shown as not overlapping with the political and the economic realms. This has only been done in order to leave enough space to make visible the public sphere. In reality, the three societal realms of culture, politics, and economy overlap and reach into each other.

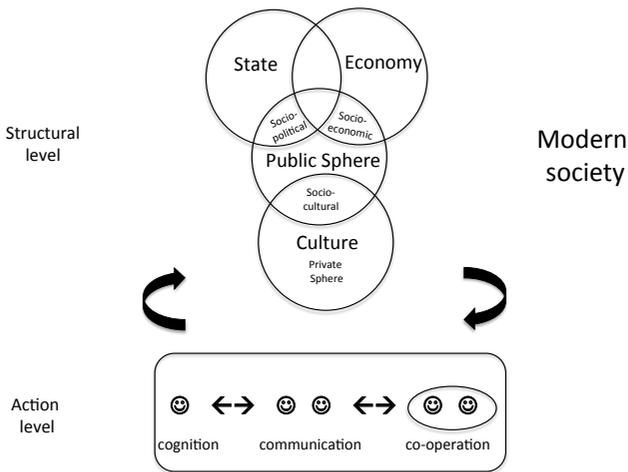


Figure 3.5: A model of modern society.

The public sphere is a mediating sphere, in which socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural groups act as interfaces between the three realms of society. The state is not the same as civil society, but rather consists of repressive state apparatuses, state-controlled parts of the economy (nationalised industries), and state-organised institutions (such as public schools, public universities, and public hospitals).

The capitalist way of organising production, distribution, and consumption is the dominant model of the modern economy. The capitalist economy is a system where money capital is accumulated, which is achieved by selling commodities produced by workers and making a profit. Workers are structurally compelled to sell their labour power to capital and to produce new goods by utilising means of production that are privately owned by capitalists. The capitalist economy's means of production, organisations, and products are not owned by the immediate producers. Since economic production is the model for politics and culture, the state and culture are in a capitalist society based on the model of the capitalist economy with which they share a common structural principle, namely the principle of accumulation. Accumulation takes on its particular forms in politics and culture, the accumulation of decision-power and meaning-making power. The modern political system is a bureaucratic state. In the version of the state as liberal, parliamentary democracy, there is a parliamentary competition of parties organised through elections. There are also basic freedoms guaranteed by the constitution (the freedoms of opinion, assembly, association, the press, movement, ownership, belief, thought, expression) as well as the state's monopoly of violence organised in the form of repressive state apparatuses (police, military, judicial system, prisons) that guarantee the reproduction of the existing order. In this version of politics, each party strives to accumulate as much decision-power as possible. In authoritarian forms of the state, such as fascism, there is a monopoly of political power controlled by a single party and its leader. There is absolute power. Furthermore, terror, nationalism, a strict hierarchical order, militarism, patriarchy, the politics of scapegoating, and the destruction of the labour movement characterise fascism. Modern culture consists of the private sphere and public culture. Modern culture is about the accumulation of definition-power, meaning-making power and reputation that are used in order to define, disseminate, reproduce, and challenge dominant meanings and worldviews. In capitalism, the single capitalist is compelled to try to amass ever more capital and profit in order to be able to survive. Accumulation is the logic of quantitative increases. The capitalist economy grows through the exploitation of labour. Accumulation combines quantification with instrumentalisation. The attempt to increase profit is combined with the instrumentalisation of human labour. The logic of accumulation has been transferred from the modern economy into modern politics and modern culture, where it takes on specific forms that have relative autonomy and emergent qualities. In the political systems, political actors try to increase and monopolise political power. They use election campaigns, the

media, public relations, the public sphere, war, violence, surveillance, control, etc. as means for instrumentalising other humans. In modern culture, actors try to increase their reputation and recognition by trying to instrumentalise human consciousness through ideology.

Modern society's three spheres are material because they are systems of production. Society is in general material: In society, humans produce social relations, structures, social systems and sociality whereby society can reproduce itself. In modern society, processes of production are at the same time processes of accumulation. Through the accumulation of power, classes create power imbalances.

Social Roles in Society

Jürgen Habermas⁵¹ sees the following social roles as constitutive for modern society: employees, consumers, clients of the state, and citizens. But one can certainly add further roles, such as those of house workers, capitalists, immigrants, prisoners, etc.

The separation of spheres and roles is characteristic of capitalism. Another characteristic of the capitalist mode of society is the creation of power structures, in which humans take on social roles in power relations (between e.g. capital/labour, state bureaucracy/citizens, state/immigrants, etc.) and execute practices that result in the production and accumulation of power. Power is actors' control over means that enable them to determine structures as well as influence processes and decisions in their own interest. In the capitalist economy, humans act in the roles of capital owners and workers. In the modern political system, we find the roles of the politician and citizens. In modern culture, there are roles such as friends, lovers, family members, and consumers.

Modern society's differentiation into diverse spheres is accompanied by the creation of social roles, in which humans act in these spheres. In the public sphere, humans do not act in private, but in common and in ways that are visible to others. The public sphere is 'the common world' that 'gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other.'⁵² In modern society's public sphere, groups organise based on the common interests of their members. In doing so, humans take on socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-cultural roles. Table 3.4 provides an overview of social roles in modern society. Modern society is based on the separation of roles and spheres so that single roles compete with each other in power relations. As a consequence, the logic of the accumulation of power dominates and there are conflicts of interest over the control of property, decision-power, and definition-power that result in social

⁵¹ Jürgen Habermas. 1987. *Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Life-world and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

⁵² Hannah Arendt. 1967/1981. *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. p. 52.

Table 3.4: Societal roles in capitalist modernity.

Dimension of Society	Roles	Roles defined by the overlap of a societal dimension and the public sphere
Politics	Political roles: Citizen, politician, bureaucrat, political party member	Socio-political roles: Privacy advocates, electoral reform advocate, feminist activist, gay rights activists, anti-racist advocate, youth movement advocate, peace movement activist, anti-penitentiary advocate, human rights activist, anti-psychiatry activist, non-governmental organisation member/activist, non-parliamentary political activist, student group member, anti-fascist activist, fascist activist, members of non-parliamentary leftist groups, members of non-parliamentary right-wing groups, etc.
Economy	Economic roles: Capital owner, entrepreneur, manager, employee, prosumer, self-employee, freelancer, peasant, cultural workers, etc.	Socio-economic roles: Labour activist, union member/activist, consumer protectionists, environmental activist
Culture	Private roles Lover, family member, friend, consumer, audience member, user	Socio-cultural roles: Sports group member, fan community member, parishioner, member of a sect or cult, member of a professional organisation, member of a voluntary associations, member of a self-help group, member of neighbourhood associations, etc.

struggles. In capitalist modernity, economic, political and cultural roles are organised in the form of classes, parties, political groups, and communities of interest that compete to control power.

Power

Power is human actors' capacity to influence society's relations. Power does not only exist in the political system. There are economic, political, and cultural forms of power (see table 3.5). Power means that actors control means and capacities that allow them to control structures and to influence processes and decisions in their interest.

Table 3.5: Three forms of power.

Dimension of society	Definition of power	Structures of power in modern society
Economy	control of use-values, property, and other resources that are produced, distributed, and consumed.	control of money, capital, and means of production
Politics	influence on collective decisions that determine and regulate aspects of the lives of humans in certain communities and social systems.	control of governments, bureaucratic and state institutions, parliament, military, police, political parties, lobby groups, civil society groups, sexuality, minorities, distinct groups in society, etc.
Culture	impact on the definition of moral values and meanings that shape what is considered as important, reputable, and worthy in society.	control of structures that define meaning and identities in society (e.g. universities, religious groups, intellectual circles, media organisations, academic associations, etc.).

3.6. Summary and Conclusions

We can summarise the main results of this chapter:

- Society is the totality of complexes of production, in which the dialectic of human subjects and structural objects manifests itself. Production acts as a model through which society is produced as totality.
- The dialectic of the economic and the non-economic (politics and culture) is constituted through the operation of the economy in the form of production in the realms of politics and culture. But politics and culture have relatively autonomous, emergent qualities that are constituted by society's complexes and relations of production. The metaphor of a house or edifice does not adequately describe society's dialectic, whereas that of the flowing river grasps the dynamics of society's complexes of production.
- In modern, capitalist society, the dialectic of the economic and the non-economic is constituted by the logic of accumulation that shapes society. It brings about the accumulation of capital, decision-power and definition-power. As a consequence, capitalist society's realms have particular contradictory dynamics.
- In social theory, we find structuralist-functionalist and action-theoretic approaches. Marx in contrast assumed there is a dialectic of praxis and structures in history and the development of society, which constitutes

a dialectic of freedom and necessity. Especially in structural crises, this dialectic poses a question about the possibility of a fundamental change of society.

Based on the foundations of social theory outlined in chapter 3, the next chapter will ask: What is the role of communication in society?