

Theories and Perspectives



'Fashions have come and gone in the history of sociological theory but the basic theoretical dilemmas remain the same.' Discuss.



This is a potentially dangerous question, in so far as it could encompass the entire body of sociological theorizing and leave the writer drowning in detail, searching hopelessly for a theme. The first port of call should be the section 'Theoretical Dilemmas' on pages 87-8, in order to establish the key arguments.

There are four dilemmas, or dichotomies, discussed in the chapter (pp.88-93):

1. *Human action versus structure.* This is a very familiar and divisive issue, and one not restricted to sociologists. It rears its head every time there is a controversy about whether criminals are intrinsically 'bad people' or whether they are the product (even 'victim') of their surroundings. Equally, it applies when the media looks for someone to blame for a policy failure or a tragic accident. Did the actions of an individual or group directly lead to an outcome, or was there a 'systemic failure'?

2. *Consensus versus conflict.* This is a thorny and confusing opposition, and one very much about emphasis. It is clear that aspects of both cohesion and disorder exist within most social environments. What is open for debate is the extent to which one dominates, how it does so and whether this is considered a good thing. There is a political element to this too: consensus and functionalist approaches are often considered to be socially and politically conservative; those that stress conflict and tension are often considered 'radical'.

3. *The problem of gender.* In many ways this is the most intractable and also the most novel of the four. It features less than any other in the history of sociological thinking (and here is a starting point for a more ambitious essay to pick a quarrel with the question) and it also fits less well under the umbrella of 'general theory'. In many eyes, it is seen as a single sub-field of sociology: 'the sociology of gender'. If there are indeed entirely separate forces at work shaping the lives of the two sexes, then the practice of universal general theory is fatally wounded. If, on the other hand, there are other contexts, differences and structures that affect human beings irrespective of gender, then it fails to qualify as general theory. Would a society entirely consisting of women be prone to capitalism, bureaucratic oligarchy, status distinctions and so on?

4. *The trajectory of modern social development.* This could be reworded as 'economy versus culture' or 'Marxism versus the rest'. What are the main drivers of social development: the general forces of capitalism or the many and varied cultural and ideological contexts that exist across the globe?

A basic essay needs at least to identify these four sets of ideas. In order to enhance the answer, the roots of the dilemmas should be highlighted. For example, the debate about social change goes back to Weber's argument 'with the ghost of Marx'; both action-structure and consensus-conflict have a good deal of Durkheim running through them, and so on. Still more ambitious would be to subject Castells, Beck, Giddens or Habermas to this process, to explore the extent to which these contemporary theorists are offering anything truly novel.