The slogan of the 1933 World Fair was ‘Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms’. Within the social sciences the conceptualisation of the changing nature of work has often corresponded with this mechanistic notion. Scientists and technologists are seen as making independent discoveries which constantly renew the productive apparatus, while managers put the results to their most efficient use, and workers react and adapt to the changes. Meanwhile industrial sociologists theorise about the best combination of conditions for productivity, progress and harmonious relations.

It is a framework of ideas normally standing in sharp contrast to a labour process theory emphasising the social construction and conflictual character of work relations, science and technology. Yet the contrast is not with any single set of ideas in the social sciences. There is a bewildering variety of disciplines which claim work as their province. Industrial sociology coexists with organisational theory, management sciences, industrial relations, the social psychology of work, the sociology of occupations, to name only the major ones.

The origins of the sociology of work lie in the attempts of the classical theorists to come to terms with the nature of industrialisation. Marx, Weber and Durkheim all wrote about work, not as specialists, but within wider general theories (Esland and Salaman, 1975). Their respective theoretical influences have remained strong, though increasingly filtered through narrow specialisms.
A particular concentration on the sphere of work as such is normally dated from the emergence of plant studies like those of Western Electric in Chicago in the 1930s by Mayo (1945). In this period sociologists, psychologists and even anthropologists combined to study workplace behaviour, primarily in the context of helping management to understand variations and restrictions of output.

Dissatisfaction and further developments in the post-war era have led to rival schools of thought and further specialisms. Some researchers have maintained an emphasis on studying workplace behaviour directly, shifting the focus to the relations between forms of technology and the social organisation of work. Others have diverged to examine the rules underlying the functioning of organisations, with direct applications to patterns of control; or in a parallel shift away from direct work relations to an emphasis on industrial relations; the framework of bargaining and conflict between capital and labour. A further alternative has been to stress the more general features of class and class imagery, noting the interrelations with the world of work.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide an historical account of the development of various specialisms and schools of thought (see Rose, 1975), nor to make a full examination of the theories and the contrasts between them (see Salaman, 1981).¹ The aim is to look at the major systems of ideas and concepts that link the sociology of work together, so that a contrast is provided to concepts used in labour process theory in the rest of the book. While the fragmentation of the social science treatment of work is an important problem in its own right,² there are sufficient conceptual and methodological overlaps—concerning understandings of skill, technology, the division of labour, and the organisation of work—to make such a comparison necessary and worthwhile.

There is a newer sociology of work influenced by labour process theory, but the traditionally influential body of ideas can be examined through a series of debates on key issues that have taken place. Before this, however, it is worth noting that the parallel debates took place in a context of general models of industrial society in the post-war period. The most influential of these was presented by Kerr and others in 1962.