Chapter 4

Cultural Analysis and Systems Theory

The Concept of a Common Culture: From Durkheim to Parsons

As we have seen, the broad trend in the cultural sociology of Weber and Simmel lay in their attempts to theorise the developments of a specific domain of culture intrinsic to modernity. In Weber's case, culture was linked with social change, generating values which, once internalised by agents, led to the necessary motivations for particular modes of social action. For Weber, culture was bound up with the production and communication of meanings; it was an active, living process. As Clifford Geertz has noted, Weber conceives of man as 'an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun', with culture consisting of those webs in which the analysis is 'not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning' (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). However, what should be added to Geertz's formulation is that Weber's cultural sociology goes beyond a narrowly focused semiotics, basing itself on broad historical transformations and, more particularly, on the pathologies of modernity.

In contrast to Weber's historical hermeneutics, Emile Durkheim's sociology, with its origins in the positivistic tradition of Comte and Taine, tended to underemphasise the communicative element in cultural analysis, especially Weber's focus on the problem of meaning, treating culture as an external objective social fact. But Durkheim's
significance for the sociology of culture lies in his attempts to go beyond sociological positivism (which was mainly the theoretical standpoint of his early work, notably *The Division of Labour in Society* and *Suicide*) and develop what Jeffrey Alexander has called ‘a cultural logic for society’, to theorise culture not simply as an external structure but rather as a relatively autonomous process of beliefs and human practices (Alexander, 1990). Thus in his study *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) Durkheim examined the role played by ‘collective representations’ in social life seeking to link ritual and symbolic forms with problems of social integration and social solidarity.

In his early work Durkheim had adopted a modified base–superstructure model in order to distinguish between the material basis of society (which included the volume and density of the population, territorial organisation and levels of technological development) and its institutional structure (consisting of the religious, educational and family institutions). This latter normative sphere involved both beliefs and practices, as well as collective representations, collective forms of action bound up with moral concepts, legal rules and religious notions (embodied in ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, religion, etc.). Durkheim argued that in conditions where the material structure was dominant the individual was wholly constrained, lacking any real autonomy; in contrast, if the institutional, normative sphere is relatively independent then the individual has greater freedom and choice. As society evolves from pre-modern to modern forms of social solidarity, the institutional – normative sphere becomes more and more autonomous. For Durkheim, social solidarity was possible only if the normative embodied moral and universal values, elements which individuals accept and internalise as desirable ends in themselves and not as relativist values linked with individual and group interests.

It would be wrong, then, to reduce Durkheim’s cultural theory to a form of positivism. Culture is not defined, or theorised, in terms of external, reified and constraining structures, but as a symbolic order, a universe of shared meanings which effectively motivate individuals through values and ideas. Culture is thus defined as a pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms (collective representations) which exist both in and outside the individual. It is through these collective structures that individuals share experiences, concepts and beliefs and effectively communicate with each other. In this way social