From the previous chapter, it may be seen how critical understandings of power relations and the dynamics of change or transformation may interconnect. Inherent within the definitions of power relations discussed so far are dynamics of conflict, opportunity or transformation. Power itself may be defined as the capacity to bring about, or prevent, shifts in positioning with regard to pre-existing discursive, material or emotional contexts. In this chapter, I explore how processes of change have been understood within (and at the margins of) modernist thought – for example, within systems theory – and within those critical approaches that have identified conflict and contradiction as a motive force for personal and social transformation.

This sets the scene for a discussion of how different modes of power may relate to particular trajectories of change. Some trajectories may involve more fluid or incremental modes of change, while others may build up to some form of ‘crisis’ which may, or may not, open up the possibility of emancipatory transformations of personal or social organisation. These processes of generative tension are mapped using systems, psychodynamic and power relations perspectives, and points of similarity and difference between these are explored. These theoretical models form the basis for a discussion of practice strategies, in terms of both preventative/developmental work, and crisis resolution.

**Systems, harmony and change**

Change and transformation, like power, are concepts which sometimes fit uneasily with modernist thought, although modernity has been characterised by rapid processes of social transition within an industrialising and globalising economy. While lived experience of social
change may unsettle the notion that current arrangements are inevitable, modernism has tended to prioritise the study of social systems in terms of their consistencies and regularities, seeking to fix social relations on an orderly and predictable basis, and sometimes to idealise these as functional for, and in the interests of, all of society.

Somewhat on the edge of a positivist mapping of timeless social laws, and potentially giving a rather different account of agency and change, lies systems theory. Given its importation from natural science and control systems engineering, its credentials would seem safe enough for modernism:

The basic thought form of systems theory remains classical positivism and behaviourism... . It offers nothing new to ... the problem of Cartesian dualism. There remains no point at which one can say that there is a link between subjectivity and material processes. (Lilienfield 1987: p. 250)

Nevertheless, central to systems theory is a potentially radical focus on relationships rather than things-in-themselves, and implicit within this is the possibility that relationships and forms of organisation may not be fixed for all time. Social systems are seen as being defined and maintained by their rule structures, comprising immediate (and sometimes explicit) sets of expectations, attributions, attitudes, ways of seeing, and behavioural ‘custom and practice’. In turn, these may be located within the context of overarching (and often implicit) ‘meta’-rules that govern the overall trajectory, role structure and orientation of the system as whole. In this way, regulation becomes posed as an issue, rather than something that may be taken for granted.

Systems theory provides a framework both for analysing current forms of organisation, and of deviations from them. Within its more conservative applications, the emphasis has been on using systems theory to delineate the proper place, and appropriate boundaries, of elements of social organisation within the modern social order (see Parsons 1960; Craib 1984). While empirical existence of deviations from the norm may be recognised, they are understood within the context of policies, procedures and processes whereby aberrant shifts in role or behaviour are turned around and returned to the bounds of acceptability. Circular patterns of breaking out, and being steered back in, may be conceptualised, within systems terminology, as processes of homeostatic regulation. Such an approach, predicated on an assumption of essential social harmony, is only comfortable with ‘first order’ change: shifts and transitions that fit within, and are guided by, the