Over the past fifteen years, Anthony Giddens has produced a series of studies in social theory that must at the very least be called impressive. Despite the boom in theoretical work during the '70s, he is the only British sociologist of recent generations to attempt the ambitious project of integrating the classical traditions of social theory with modern theoretical and philosophical insights. In many ways his project must be regarded as equal in scope to that of Parsons, his frequent target.

Giddens's assessment of his own intentions has remained consistent: a revision of the main themes of 19th-century social thought in the light of the crisis of contemporary sociology. He does not claim to offer a new finalised synthesis, but rather to try to change the grounds of the debate, bridge gaps between traditions and identify the points at which differences may be transcended (1). Despite these reservations, we can identify the synthesising intention of his work, leading him from classical social theory to problems of methodology, in the widest sense of the word, and a consideration of contemporary capitalism and socialism. Dominant concerns include the debate between naturalist and humanist approaches to social science, and the related debate between structural explanations and accounts in terms of social action theory. In relation to the former, he comes down firmly on the side of those who assert the specificity of the methods and objects of social science. To deal with the latter problem, he develops a concept of 'structuration' and of the 'duality of structures' which maintains the necessity for analysing both structural and interactional features of social life. He claims that this approach is neither a hermeneutics nor a form of structuralism (Giddens, 1984, xxi).

The fact that this paper will be critical of Giddens's work should not be taken as an attempt to devalue it. He raises crucial issues and I find myself in agreement with many of his arguments. Above all, he takes modern theory seriously and sociology has become more interesting as a result. However, it seems to me that social theory is not yet ready for the type of project he has undertaken. The problems are too complex and the prospects rather less encouraging than he would have us believe. Despite the value of individual arguments, his attempts to overcome the fragmentation of theory result in a forced reduction of the complexity of the social world and lead to description rather than explanation. He loses vital dimensions of the theories he examines, and they cease to do the theoretical work of telling us something about the social world that, previously, we did not know. I believe that the end result of this is a significant incoherence in his central concepts of 'structuration' and the 'duality of structures' and an assumption about social order that is as utopian as Parsons.

My criticism of Giddens, then, is that he over-simplifies the social world, and I will try to demonstrate this through a series of examples taken from various places in his work over the last fifteen years. First, I will show how he reduces the complexity of the social world and of the theories he employs to build his own concept of it. Secondly, I will argue that this involves him in an over-simple idea of causality, and, despite his occasional statements to the contrary, an unjustified assertion of the interpretive nature of sociology and a limited conception of action and agency. This should be sufficient to demonstrate the incoherence of his central concepts and his utopian view of the nature of social order.

The Elimination of Complexity

Giddens often talks about different levels of social organisation as if the social world possessed a depth, and there were underlying social structures which bore a causal relationship to observable phenomena. However, in the course of his bridge-building he loses sight of this depth. Everything seems to be dealt with on the same analytic level, with, on occasions, a consequent confusion in the priority he gives to one factor over another.

My first example is an analysis of class structure, found in his theoretical discussion of class in The Class Structure of Advanced Societies (CSAS). In the course of a lengthy and intelligent criticism of various approaches he seems to define a crucial problem as that of moving between the multiplicity of relationships in advanced societies to the identification of structural forms. This is also the way the problem has come to be defined by many modern Marxists and Giddens seems to develop his own theory almost as an equivalent. He offers a modified version of Weber's definition of class as being based on property ownership, with the concept of property extended to include the rights and capacities it confers upon the owner (1973: Chapter 6). We could take this as referring to an underlying structural level which helps us to order and make sense of the multiplicity of relationships that we actually observe. Indeed, in what many might consider a rather odd comment on Marx, Giddens indicates that his intention is close to this: '... to focus upon the modes in which "economic" relationships become translated into "non-economic social structure"' (1983, p. 105). This may be taken as a statement of the problem faced by every Marxist writer on the subject for the past century; however, such an interpretation cannot be sustained. It seems that we do not actually arrive at classes proper until after the operation of a number of 'proximate' and 'mediate' structuring factors which appear to be dealt with at the same analytic level as market capa-
cities (1973, pp. 107ff.). The basic definition seems to refer to the level of underlying structure to begin with, but ends by referring to the multiplicity of relations which need to be structured: its apparent causal role, at least as laying the foundation of social class, is displaced by the granting of causal priority to the structuring factors. There is a sliding of priorities and a flattening of levels.

Now, one does not have to accept the 'correctness' of an orthodox Marxist base/superstructure analysis to recognise the usefulness of distinguishing between different levels of social organisation and of attempting to identify causal relations between them. Giddens constantly recognises the significance of the questions that it raises, not least in the above quote. He begins with such a distinction but is unable to sustain it, and I think it is arguable that this failure pre­ sages the incoherence of his concept of 'structuration'. Here, he comes very close to saying the classes exist (in terms of market capacities) before they exist (as a result of structuring factors).

My second example concerns Giddens's discussion of Heidegger's work in Central Problems of Social Theory (CPST) and A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism (CCHM). Here again we find a reduction in the complexity of the world. Heidegger's concern is with ontology, the nature of Being itself, and in particular the way in which Time is constitutive of Being. One does not have to understand the subtleties of Heidegger to realise that Giddens's use of his theory in effect trivialises these concerns; in fact he demonstrates it in himself:

... measurable time-space is derived - that is, imposed on time-space relations - in Western Culture and should not therefore be confused with the nature of time-space as such. (1981, p. 33)

In other words, there is a social organisation of time and space. One of Heidegger's existentialist concerns is the way in which the social organisation of time and space enables us to hide from the reality of Being and Time, to slip into inauthenticity. Giddens's concern becomes simply the social organisation of time and space in the constitution of different societies. It is as if Giddens builds a bridge between Heidegger's concerns and social theory and then destroys it, leaving Heidegger standing on the far side. In Giddens's latest work, The Constitution of Society (CS), there is much concern with the social organisation of time and space, but Heidegger receives only a handful of mentions.

My third example is some comments which conclude a discussion of the work of Erik Erikson in CS. I want to use them to demonstrate again Giddens's oversimplification both of theory and of the real world. Erikson is a psychoanalyst who has particularly concerned himself with the nature of identity and its relation to social organisation. Giddens is critical of the concept of ego-identity.

Even Erikson admits that it has at least four connotations. Sometimes it refers to a 'conscious' sense of individual identity. It can also mean '... an unconscious striving for a continuity of personal character'. A third meaning is 'a sense of obligation for the silent doings of ego synthesis'. A fourth sense is 'a maintenance of an inner-solidarity with a group's ideals and identity'. None of these single uses, it might be remarked, is particularly lucid, let alone the concept that embraces them all?

(1984, p. 60)

All in all, then, the term does 'too much conceptual work'. Now, I have no objection to striving for conceptual clarity, and it is certainly true that the concept of ego-identity does a lot of work. Nonetheless it seems to me that the concept is useful precisely be-
The interpretive nature of sociology

The discussion of causality points to Giddens's tendency to reduce social structure to social action. Since he views social science in terms of a choice between positivism and hermeneutics, he also has to choose between seeing social structures as independent of human action, which they determine, or as simply constituted by human action. There is a third alternative which escapes him despite his frequent claims to be presenting a 'third way': social structures may be seen as independent, to some degree, of human consciousness, and as having a problematic relation to human action, being neither a simple product nor a simple cause of action. Giddens, however, constantly asserts the identity of structure and action:

... understanding is not merely a method of making sense of what others do, nor does it require an emphatic grasp of their consciousness in some mysterious or obscure fashion. It is the very ontological condition of human life in society as such.

(1976, p. 19)

and, more broadly, social structures are both constituted by human agency and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution.

(1976, p. 121)

From this come the characteristic themes of his later work: the nature of action and language, and the insistence that actors have considerable, if not always articulable, knowledge of their situation. In CCHM, there is an acknowledgement that social processes can operate behind people's backs, but such operations are seen entirely in terms of the unacknowledged conditions of action or their unintended consequences. It is, of course, quite possible to acknowledge the truth of the first quotation. However, the fact that understanding is 'the ontological condition' of human life does not imply that it is the only ontological condition. There is no prior reason why another such condition might not be the existence of relatively independent social structures. This is no more than saying that individuals are capable of creative thought and at the same time our thought is limited by the physical structure of our body and mind. How we conceptualise such structures and their development, or is simply constituted by human action, as is their relationship to our understanding and action. In some ways, these are the questions of social science. Giddens, however, seems to rely primarily on a (not unworthy) humanist impulse to avoid these issues. The depth and complexity of social structure and its relationship to our lives is lost. Even more unfortunate, as I have already indicated in my comments on his use of Heidegger, he seems to lose the depth of human action as well.

Agency and action

Dissolving social structure into social action removes the object of social action; it can now only act upon itself, not upon social structures. In NRSM, Giddens emphasises the reflexively constitutive nature of action. He argues that the traditional debate about action in terms of reasons and causes wrongly divides action into what are taken to be neatly identifiable components: reasons, motives, purposes, intentions etc. He suggests, rightly I think, that only rarely, if at all, can we identify such clearcut categories. Action is, rather, a continuous flow, involving a hierarchy of purposes and constant monitoring by an agent. He suggests that it is better to speak of rationalisations rather than reasons (1976, Chapter 2). However, he goes no further than putting the traditional categories into motion: reasons become reasoning.

On several occasions, he presents a conception of the social actor as comprised of different levels. He distinguishes an unconscious, taken-for-granted framework of meaning, common-sense, and ongoing reflexive rationalisation. In CPST (1979, Chapter 5) he seems to give the unconscious some priority. However, what is missing here in the way of theoretical work is an account of any relationship between these levels, and there is a little comment on their internal structures and workings. It is precisely these areas that are significant. If, as Giddens argues, the unconscious is the source of motivation, then we need to understand how it works and how it comes to appear in consciousness. If it is true that motivation is based on taken-for-granted and common-sense assumptions, then we need to know how these effect our conscious beliefs and rationalisations. Simply pointing to the existence of these areas is not sufficient, and we find here a similar trivialisation of theory to that I noted in relation to Heidegger. Ethnomethodology, for example, is a questionable approach which nonetheless raises questions which challenge the main body of sociological thought in a new way. Whatever one might think of its success, it has developed an intricate and detailed methodology for laying bare the rules that govern action. In the work of Cicourel, for example, this is extended into a sophisticated theory of perception and conception, and of agency. Giddens manages to reduce all this to a series of generalised statements about the world: that action is rule-governed, that language is important and that context is important (1977, Chapter 1). The theoretical work of ethnomethodology is lost. The way in which Giddens slips the object of action back into the action itself, together with the loss of depth in his view of agency, can be seen in his contradictory criticism of Habermas in SSPT. In an argument the beginning of which would gladden the heart of any orthodox Marxist, he points out that Habermas's distinction between labour and interaction loses the possibility of understanding dominance as tied to material interests. Power becomes simply a matter of ideologically deformed communication. However, he goes on to argue:

Instead of equating labour with instrumental action and separating these analytically from interaction ... I think it important to place in the forefront the concepts of production and reproduction of interaction, as contingent accomplishments of human actors. If, as I have outlined elsewhere, processes of production and reproduction are treated as involving the reflexive application of rules and resources in the service of the realisation of interests (wants) power emerges, together with symbolic meanings and normative sanctions, as integral to interaction rather than analytically separate from it.

(1977, p. 133)

Thus, he begins by pointing to the importance of material interests which presuppose an external object for action, but in the quotation, he absorbs material interests (labour, instrumental action) back into social interaction, and defines social interaction in terms of symbolic meanings, normative sanctions and the reflexive application of rules and resources, a simple list of the features of agency. From criticising Habermas from the Marxist end of the spectrum, he moves to becoming more of a hermeneuticist than Habermas himself.

Structure and structuration

The reduction of qualitatively different phenomena to the same level, and the consequent loss of depth, are responsible for what I referred to earlier as the incoherence in Giddens's central concepts. The differ-
ence between structure and action is both hinted at and blurred in his notion of the 'duality of structures'. Structures are seen as enabling action, as its medium, as presupposed by and resulting from action. If there is structuration, then there must, somewhere, somehow, be structures. His most developed discussion of the issue, in CPST, reveals some intriguing statements. How are we to conceive of the structures that are 'struc-
turated'?

I shall argue that 'structure' has a 'virtual' existence, as instantiations or moments, but this is not the same as identifying structure with models invented by sociological or anthropological observers. Although I shall not defend the claim, I regard the concepts below as compatible with a realist ontology. (1979, p. 63)

If his concept is compatible with a realist ontology, then we ought to be able to see a structure or its effects, but we shall have to be quick, since it only has an instantaneous or momentary existence. I am not sure what happens if it has a virtual existence. It might be that Giddens is a realist in the sense that for George Orwell some statements were true - they were essentially true even if demonstrably false.

Then again:

I shall not regard structure as referring to its most basic sense in the form of sets, but rather to the set and not the set. In social reproduction, 'bind' time. Thus 'structure' as applied below, is first of all treated as a generic term; but structures can be identified as sets or matrices of rules, resources and properties.

(1979, pp. 63-64)

One wonders how a moment or an instantiation may bind time (not to mention the question of whether time may be bound at all - it has a tendency to move very quickly). More important, if a structure is not a set, then how are we to identify it, since that would involve identifying interrelationships, i.e. identifying a set? But then again, we discover that a structure is a set, even if it is not basically a set:

I shall argue that strictly speaking there are no such things as 'rules of transformation'; all social rules are transformational, in the sense that structure is not manifested in empirical similarity of social items.

(1979, p. 64)

If we cannot find structure in the similarity of social items, then how are we to recognise differences since the two imply and depend upon each other? It would seem from this that we certainly cannot recognise the effects of structures in social items, so perhaps this makes Giddens a virtual realist. And he would have, despite himself, to be a model-building realist; if we cannot observe structures or their effects, then how else can we identify them except through model building? And a model is, in some sense, a set.

So far, we have learnt that structures have an instantaneous, virtual, real existence; they are not models, but it seems we have to build models of them, although it is not clear whether this is because of or despite their instantaneous existence. They are also rules, defined by their differences which bind time (here clearly despite their instantaneous existence); but since they cannot be defined by similarity, they cannot be defined by difference. They cannot be defined.

Finally,

As I shall employ it, 'structure' refers to 'structural property', or more exactly, to 'structuring property'; structuring properties providing the 'binding' of time and space in social systems. I argue that these properties can be understood as rules and resources, re-
cursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structures exist paradigmatically as an absent set of differences ... (and this implies) ... recognising the existence of (a) knowledge - as memory traces of how things are to be done (said, written) on the part of social actors; (b) social practices organised through the recursive mobilisation of that knowledge; (c) capabilities that the production of these practices presuppose.

(1979, p. 64)

Now we learn that they are properties, resources, and rules; that they are somehow form and content at the same time. Since they are also structuring properties, they are active, and the question arises of how an absent set of differences can possess the quality of agency; we end by moving from an absent set of differences which does things, the realm of theology, to a partial and mundane list of human qualities that could be gleaned in rather more detail from a perusal of standard interactionist and ethnomethodological works.

It seems after all that 'structure' and 'structura-
tion' refer to the active features of human beings. There is no doubt that Giddens tackles vast and real problems of ontology, epistemology, theory building and many other things. What is disturbing is the way these are run together and discussed as if they were solved, the term 'structure' stretched to hide the problems that were there from the beginning. The final conclusion seems to be that we have to make a sort of gestalt switch, what he calls a 'methodological epoché' in our analysis we can examine social systems as 'strategic conduct', i.e. social action, or we can embark upon 'institutional analysis'. In other words, we end with the old division between structure and action, seen simply as alternative ways of looking at the same world - that world being essentially seamless and with little internal complexity. Thus, we come to Utopia.

Utopia

Dahrendorf's famous critique of Parsons directed itself to the explicit assumptions and detail of the latter's work, drawing parallels with literary Utopias. I would accuse Giddens of a more mundane utopianism, something more like wishful thinking, but in the same context as Parsons; that of social order.

Giddens's assumptions about the basis of social order are more difficult to find than Parsons's. In NRSM (1976, Chapter 3), he offers a Durkheimian account with a phenomenological slant: social order is based on a sort of collective conscience comprised of taken-for-granted assumptions and rules. However, I think there is a more profound and at the same time more naive account. I have argued that Giddens reduces the depth of the social world in various ways and that he absorbs social structure into social action, which is in turn seen in terms of human qualities. There must, then, be something about the social actor that ensures we live in an ordered world rather than in chaos. The most explicit statement of what he assumes about the actor that I have found is in CPST:

'Ontological security can be taken to depend upon the implicit faith actors have in the conventions (codes of signification and forms of normative regulation) via which, in the duality of structure, the reproduction of social life is effected. In most circumstances of social life, the sense of ontological security is routinely grounded in mutual knowledge, employed such that the interaction is 'unproblematic' or can be largely 'taken for granted'.

(1979, p. 219)

This claim is repeated more recently in CS. What is
happening here is a reversal of Parsons's ordering of priorities. Whereas Parsons sees the stable personality as a product of the social system, Giddens sees the social system, in terms of common-sense and the taken-for-granted, as a product of the ontologically secure individual. It seems that we have social order because people are creatures of habit, sustaining their sense of security in the social order. I do not want to dispute Giddens's argument here: we do find security in the routine, and perhaps construct the routine because it gives us security. He is right so far as he goes. My point, rather, is that this is only half the picture. If that were all there is to it, the world would probably be a nicer, but perhaps more boring, place and in this sense he is indulging in wishful thinking.

That he is only half right, engaging in wishful thinking, seems to be self-evident once we step outside sociology books. Most of us live lives that are in part routine; but they are also fraught with uncertainties, anxieties and puzzles that originate in the depths that Giddens has lost in his synthesising project. Our internal worlds also contain fear, self-questioning, doubt and agony which at times enhance the banality of our common-sense social world. We are regularly thrown by external processes over which we have no control, processes that result in wars, unemployment, poverty. These disturbances, these absences of routine, have their origins in unconscious processes that result in wars, unemployment, poverty.

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These disturbances, these absences of routine, have their origins in unconscious processes that result in wars, unemployment, poverty. Giddens does violence: Heidegger's existentialism, Marxism, even ethnomethodology. We can see too why he wants a simple conception of ego-identity. These are the areas that require theoretical work: the development of concepts that make intelligible what is puzzling, painful or threatening.

Giddens's tendency to gloss these areas and problems perhaps lies in the nature of his project itself. To criticise him for a utopian conception of social order is, despite my argument, just off-target. The real utopianism is rather his conception of social theory: the idea that a synthesising project is possible, or that even that bridge-building is possible. The dream of such a synthesis must always be there; it is, after all, a regulating principle of the scientific enterprise. However, there is nothing in the recent history of sociology which suggests that it is now possible to achieve such a project. Giddens's work emerges at a time not of convergence but of increasing fragmentation in social theory, with all the obscurities and dead ends and bitter debates that go with such a breaking up. My argument has been that Giddens avoids such difficulties and debates rather than solves them. What he leaves us with is a theory of simple complication. It is complicated because he identifies a lot that must be taken account of: the agent and the agent's unconscious, taken-for-granted interpretive schemes, common-sense knowledge, reflective monitoring, the process of structuration and the duality of structures, time-space constitution, reproduction and related ideas such as presence-availability and so on. It is simple in that the result is a series of generalising and descriptive concepts which are simply aligned with each other. It is difficult to see the concepts of structuration and the duality of structures as any more than a verbal solution to the rocky problems that have broken the major theoretical systems of sociology from structural functionalism to Marxism.

Conclusion

This essay has become increasingly polemical and it is perhaps now time to move back to what I said in the introduction is good about Giddens. It would be satisfying to offer a way forward that held out as much promise as his project, but behind all the criticisms, my underlying theme has been that this is not possible. To find the real value of Giddens's work involves not bridge-building nor the destruction of bridges but rather an unwinding of what he tries to knit together. It means returning to the different traditions and nagging away at old problems, from the Marxist base-superstructure debates to the reasons-causes arguments and many others. His contributions to these arguments are real and interesting but neither he, nor anybody else to my knowledge, has yet produced satisfactory solutions. I am suggesting that theory and theoretical work is more mundane and slower than Giddens makes it appear: it is a matter of constantly finding new problems and disputing old solutions, and of trying to arrive at reasonable assessments of what a theory does and does not enable us to understand.

In this context, Giddens's other major contribution has been to take seriously a range of thinkers and issues which, strictly speaking, comes from outside sociology. It is generally true that when they have been considered by sociologists it has been through a sort of enthusiastic discipleship that Giddens manages to avoid. He is reasonable and reserved in his discussions and his work has been worthwhile. I say this because I think that one of the implications of the fragmentation of social theory is that sociology as a discipline has been unable to generate, either from its conceptual frameworks or its empirical research, a real conception of its own possibilities and limits. Despite the obscurity and difficulty of much modern philosophy, such work does begin to approach issues and choices that are presupposed by sociological theory. Giddens sociological theory needs to be aware. Such philosophy provides a map on which sociology must place itself, whether it wants to or not. It is perhaps this area of his work that is most important since it offers the possibility of new ways of looking at the old problems to which we must return.