Of course, any attempt to write a textbook about social theory will produce an incomplete list of ideas and perspectives. What I try to do in this book is strike a careful balance between making the 'canon' of social theory accessible while paying attention to debates concerning its lack of diversity and inclusivity. As Alatas and Sinha's (2017) book *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon* makes clear, there is a need to critique the **Eurocentrism** that dominates the historical development of social theory. I agree, and this book draws attention to these concerns, particularly in Chapter 9, which deals with the need to 'decolonise sociology' through the works of Ali Meghji and Gurminder Bhambra. It also draws attention to the need to push beyond the traditional boundaries of the 'canon' and engage more substantially with new materialist and posthumanist scholarship. As Chapter 10 discusses, some of the most problematic aspects of social thought are rooted in a mixture of European colonialism and **anthropocentrism**, raising critical questions about the future of social theory and the dangers of theorising about humans (or what constitutes the 'human') as above and beyond non-humans, such as animals and the natural environment. From this perspective, I hope the book not only brings students into conversation with recent debates in social and cultural theory (rather than solely revisiting the 'classics') but does so in a way that helps them to identify the historical connections between these ideas. In my view, this is an integral part of 'thinking about theory'.

Thinking About Theory

One of the first things I explain to my students is that social theory, at its most fundamental, involves 'thinking' about the social world. When we theorise about society, we often try to explain how a social event occurs or why a specific person or group behaves in a particular or patternable way (though some theorists challenge this assumption about theory and research; see Chapters 6 and 10). As Ian Craib (1992) argues, social theory is less a matter of just learning what theorists have said and more about learning to think theoretically; learning what we can from ideas to use them to explain and understand some kind of experience or general processes within the world. In other words, social theory helps us to reach explanations, but to do this we must 'think' about the world critically – we must perform some kind of mental abstraction as we 'step away' from the observable events in the world and 'theorise' about what might be causing them to happen or what their potential effects might be.

One of the most challenging things about social theory is that this process of thinking can, at first, seem entirely unfamiliar. We might consider it akin to being transported to an unknown world with a new and mysterious language. This can feel like quite an isolating experience, but, in truth, many of the problems that social theorists deal with are ones we face in our everyday lives. As Steven Miles (2001, p. 6) writes, everything we do involves some measure of theory: we might theorise about why our sports teams never appear to succeed, despite substantial financial investment. We might theorise about the cost of living and whether our student loans are sufficient to survive. We might also theorise how best to

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achieve a first-class degree or graduate employment. The critical point is that we are very used to 'thinking' through everyday problems and social theory is no different: it provides a way to understand what is happening around us.

One way I invite my students to start thinking about theory is to ask them to reflect on the possible conditions for why a given phenomenon occurs and what some plausible answers might be. Consider, for example, the theorising involved in making a medical diagnosis or coming to a verdict in a court case. In medicine, a doctor is given a set of observable symptoms and must think through what disease or illness best explains them. Likewise, when a jury listens to evidence in a criminal case, they must think through all of the evidence and consider whether the defence or prosecution has provided the best explanation. In each case, what is taking place is a process of exploring observable events and considering the (many) possible explanatory conditions.

Social theory is similar: it proposes ways of making sense of society through reasoned consideration of why things happen. Yet, as Craib (1992, pp. 5–6) notes, it is also different. Social theory provides us with the principles, frameworks and concepts to start reasoning through the world more systematically and logically. These principles will shape and guide the kinds of conditions that we think explain social phenomena. For example, as Chapter 8 discusses, there are many different types of feminist theory, each focusing on different aspects of social inequality and injustice – from legal and economic to psychological and cultural conditions. Each theory guides how we think about feminist issues differently, which is also why it is essential to get the broadest possible exposure to theoretical ideas before making up our minds about what the social world is like and why!

Theory also shapes our arguments, such as when writing an essay or research paper. As Tom Chatfield (2017) notes, an argument is simply an attempt to persuade someone of the truth through the reasoning of ideas. Theory helps us make persuasive arguments as we integrate certain principles or concepts into our thinking and use them to reason through particular examples. This is why I recommend to students that they reflect on how theorists construct convincing arguments through the reasoning of their ideas. Think about the ways in which theorists 'set up' their assumptions about the world and then try to find ways to support these assumptions through empirical research. There is something very persuasive about arguments which clearly introduce their 'truths', that is, what they are saying about society, before reasoning through the different concepts and examples that support this particular vision.

Roots and Branches

Another way I encourage my students to think about theory is by using the metaphor of a 'tree' with various roots and branches. As Peter Kivisto (2020) argues, we can conceive of social theory as emerging through two stages. The former comprises the 'roots' – a period roughly between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which sociology emerges as a distinctive discipline by distinguishing itself from philosophy and the life sciences. Kivisto (2020, p. xxiv) writes:

> During this time, the first explicit advocates of this new field of inquiry appeared on the scene and created what might seem as the infrastructure needed to sustain it, particularly the carving out of a legitimate place in the university system, with all that implies. This time frame represents sociology's classical period. The individuals associated with this era were responsible, even when they were not trying to do so, for giving sociology its initial identity.

In this book, I identify these individuals as Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. They, alongside crucial thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, constitute the central figures of an early history of social theorising. Again, this list is not exhaustive and, where possible, I have tried to identify alternative histories and perspectives (see, for example, the discussion of Harriet Martineau in Chapter 4 or W.E.B. Du Bois in Chapter 9), but it does capture the broad consensus that these thinkers are at the 'roots' of social theory. This book examines these individuals precisely because they get us thinking in 'intellectually productive ways' (Kivisto, 2020, p. xxvi) and provide the foundations for contemporary social thought.

For example, Marx's concern with capitalism and ideology has become productive grounds for thinking critically about a range of contemporary issues, from mass media, consumerism and digital labour (see Chapter 2) to questions concerning the nature of structure and agency (see Chapters 6 and 7) and feminist and postcolonial politics (see Chapters 8 and 9). Durkheim's work also remains a fruitful way of discussing **social epistemology** and what constitutes social scientific research and knowledge, particularly in dialogue with interpretivist and phenomenological perspectives (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Durkheim's ideas influence cultural sociology, shaping how we understand social participation in rituals and collective events, such as sports and games (see Chapter 4). The ideas of Nietzsche, Freud and Weber also continue to be foundational. They each offer critical insight into the nature of power and social control, foreshadowing the emergence of various postmodern, feminist and new materialist perspectives (see Chapters 6, 8 and 10).

Kivisto characterises the latter stage of social theory from the mid-twentieth century to the present day as the 'branches' of a tree. Kivisto (2020, p. xxix) writes that 'many inside and outside the world of social theory would describe the situation as a cacophony of competing approaches'. Indeed, today, few attempt to unify social theory around a single theoretical school or model. Instead, multiple perspectives guide social and cultural research, some of which have very different beginnings and trajectories. One way to discuss these differences is to consider three 'branches' of social thought: 'consensus', 'conflict' and 'action' theories.

Consensus perspectives focus on the role of human socialisation and learned behaviour in explaining the order and predictability of societies. They have their roots in the philosophy of writers like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and John Locke, who conceive of society in terms of people's consensual nature and the possibility of living in complete and free agreement with one another. This perspective is exceptionally influential on early functionalist thinkers,

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like Durkheim and Talcott Parsons (see Chapter 4), who argue that societies socialise people into agreement and consensus through structural norms, roles and responsibilities (see Bernard, 1983).

Conflict perspectives are different. They describe societies in terms of the conflict they generate, whether as a result of either socioeconomic and cultural inequalities or because conflict is an inevitable part of human life. In the former case, it is philosophers like Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Marx who suggest that if we eliminate the (social, economic and cultural) sources of conflict in society then freedom for agreement and consensus may be possible (Bernard, 1983). On the other hand, writers like Niccolò Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Freud suggest that true consensus is never possible because societies always need to exert control over overt expressions of conflict. This assumption leads conflict theorists to focus on power rather than consensus and how social and cultural ideas act as an instrument of force and social control (see Chapters 3, 6, 8 and 9).

Action perspectives are different again. They move away from structural explanations of society to focus on the *interpretations* of individual actors and how these interpretations shape or construct orderly behaviour in society. Action perspectives suggest that the most crucial influence on an individual's behaviour is the behaviour of other individuals, rather than structures such as the unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources or social and cultural norms. Indeed, action perspectives attend to the beliefs and values of actors to understand why, for example, a person might choose to act in one particular way over another. Action perspectives have their origins in the ideas of Weber (see Chapter 3) but also in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and the philosophy of George Herbert Mead (see Chapter 5). Where Weber constructs a typology to help classify the different ways people interpret the world, Husserl considers the nature of experience, and Mead considers the methods people use for interpersonal communication. These perspectives contrast with consensus and conflict views because they question the assumption that 'real' structures determine the actions of agents. Instead, action perspectives suggest that social reality is a construct that is dependent on the ongoing interpretations and activities of individuals. This view is a frequent theme within social theory (see below).

Outside of consensus, conflict and action perspectives, there are other 'branches' within social theory worth highlighting. One is the 'linguistic turn' within social theory, which refers to perspectives that focus on the role of language in shaping communication and meaning (see Chapter 6). The linguistic turn generates a series of essential questions about how we gain access to the world through language and whether meaning is fixed or conditional on the structures of particular texts and words. The linguistic turn is exceptionally influential on poststructuralist and postmodern theorising, which challenges fundamental assumptions within the social sciences, such as whether it is possible to identify certain 'truths' about social life in a 'neutral' or 'objective' manner. The linguistic turn is also an example of where ideas within the arts and humanities (mainly through literary studies) begin to shape social and cultural research. Another recent development in social theory is the 'materialist' and 'affective' turns. These 'branches' refer to developments in new

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materialism: a set of perspectives that share an interest in discussing the properties and agency of material things while raising important questions about how humans relate to non-humans, such as animals, technology and the natural environment of planet Earth (see Chapter 10). New materialism also challenges fundamental assumptions within the social sciences, particularly the idea that the human should be the central feature of our theories and practices.

I think the metaphor of a tree, then, is a helpful way to begin visualising the landscape of social theory: behind each theorist and perspective is a set of assumptions that give way to ideas, concepts and frameworks that other thinkers borrow, take up or criticise. No social theory is fully self-enclosed, yet it is crucial to recognise that some contrasting assumptions about the world lead to different trajectories. This book, then, is divided into chapters that deal with these different paradigms, starting with the 'roots' and moving through to the 'branches'.

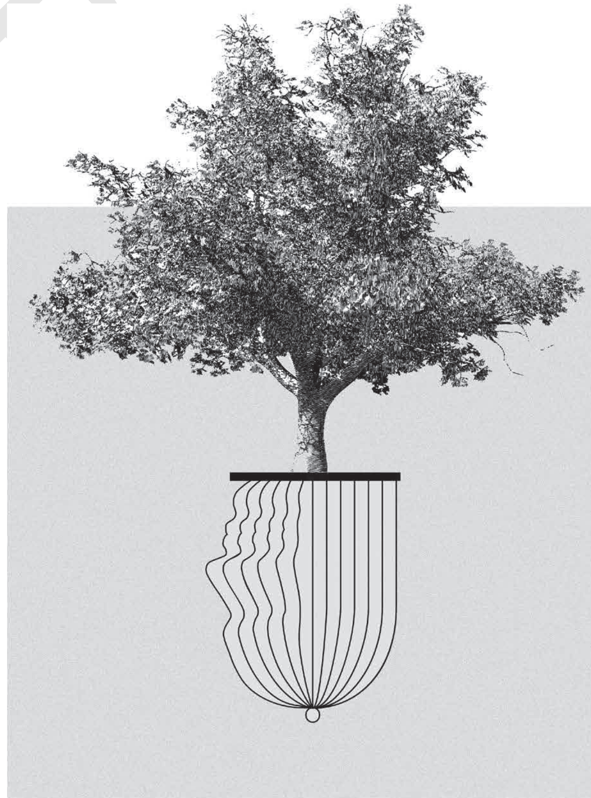

Figure 1.1 Roots and branches

Think about social theory as a 'tree' with various roots and branches. The 'roots' cage in certain assumptions about the world but also give way, allowing new perspectives to grow and flourish in the form of various 'branches' of contemporary theory.

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Frequent Themes

The final point of this chapter is to suggest that some frequent themes run across social theory. They are structure and agency, knowledge and modernity.

Structure and Agency

In one way or another, most social theories deal with the question of structure and agency, which concerns the relative importance of 'social structure' or 'agency' (or individual actions) in an analysis of how society works. This theme begins in the writings of Marx and Durkheim, who suggest that social structures determine aspects of society, whether through exploitative wage-labour relations or the social roles and rules that generate consensus within society (see Chapters 2 and 4). Weber's methodological writings introduce an alternative perspective: that it is the actions of agents, particularly their beliefs and values, which shape social behaviour (see Chapter 3). Freud and Nietzsche's perspectives are a little more complex. Freud suggests that normative social structures penetrate the mind to constrain an individual's instincts and sexual desires, leading to repression. Nietzsche outwardly rejects the idea of an objective society, suggesting that individuals are responsible for their actions and the world in which we live (see Chapter 3).

The interest in structure and agency continues with phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (see Chapter 5). Phenomenologists like Husserl do not entertain the idea that individuals are passive agents of social structures. Instead, phenomenologists consider how individuals experience the world to become subjectively engaged social actors who actively order and make sense of their daily realities. This is a theme that is also central to the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz and the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel. Symbolic interactionism is also interested in agents, focusing mainly on the role of the **self** and how individuals develop their identities through interpersonal communication and language. Notably, a sense of structure re-emerges within symbolic interactionism, particularly through the works of Erving Goffman, who points to how social institutions exercise control over individuals through the use of signs, symbols and labels. Indeed, it is through Goffman's work that we get a sense of how the micro-dimensions of face-to-face interactions might 'carry' structural rules and obligations – something that Anthony Giddens develops explicitly in 'structuration theory' (see Chapter 7).

Structuralists, poststructuralists and postmodernists interrogate the potential for language, especially within written texts, to impose meaning on the world (see Chapter 6). They view written texts and, later, discourse as a means to confer power over individuals and encourage researchers to deconstruct these texts to reveal their inconsistencies and paradoxes. This approach becomes the basis for a sceptical view about objective 'truth' claims, including the possibility of generating knowledge about external social structures and their impact on agents. Indeed, the idea of power becomes more diffuse or 'fluid' in the context of these writers. For Foucault, power is not simply a 'top-down' exercise, such as through the use of force. Instead,

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it is more sutble and complex, working through techniques of surveillance and self-governance to shape people's **subjectivity** in complex ways. For Lyotard, social life is far too ambiguous and contradictory to attempt to use social structures to explain the 'truth' of society. Indeed, Lyotard is critical of the politics that often hides behind (social) scientific explanations – an idea also developed within actor-network theory and new materialist approaches (see Chapter 10).

This question of structure and agency is dealt with acutely by theorists like Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and Margaret Archer (see Chapter 7). These theorists engage with earlier accounts of social structure and agency to 'reconcile' their differences and offer an account of how social structures produce societal change (or maintain the status quo). Their respective arguments focus on either 'merging' structure and agency together or keeping them analytically separate. In the first instance, structure and agency come together in people's practices and interpersonal communication, meaning that people 'carry' structural rules and resources in their actions. This 'carrying' takes the form of either their embodied practices (Bourdieu) or the language that people use (Giddens). In the second instance, researchers must keep structure and agency analytically separate (Archer). Archer's point is an ontological one (see social ontology): that social structures have properties and powers that are fundamentally different from agents or people. We must understand what these different powers and properties are before proceeding to explain how they interact. Archer's work, in particular, pays attention to the importance of human **reflexivity** and how it enables people to mediate their structural circumstances.

Finally, the question of structure and agency also appears in debates concerning feminism (see Chapter 8) and new materialism and **posthumanism** (see Chapter 10). Regarding feminism, there are different theoretical perspectives, which map to different understandings of the importance of structure and agency in determining aspects of inequality and **patriarchy** within society. For example, where Marxist feminists argue that socioeconomic structures are responsible for gender inequality, postmodern feminists suggest we must deconstruct social scientific understandings of sex and gender to reveal their power relations (see **dualism**). Through the work of Donna Haraway (see Chapter 8) and others, postmodern feminism is also influential on new materialist and posthuman social theory. Again, these theorists question the assumption that social structures govern social action at 'depth', preferring to argue that **assemblages** of human and non-human 'agents' make things happen. As with postmodernism, there is a sense here of the fluidity of social life and the possibility that things are constantly changing over time. There is no interest among theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (see Chapter 10) in revealing the 'truth' of society by describing the characteristics of particular social structures. Instead, the focus is on the nature of change itself and the affect(s) this has.

Knowledge

The second frequent theme in social theory is knowledge. Every type of social theory makes claims about the world, but some theories have very different understandings about what is

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'real' or not (Inglis with Thorpe, 2019, p. 4). As highlighted above, some theories suggest that society has 'real' social structures that determine people's behaviours. Other theories suggest it is people's experiences that are 'real' and which drive social behaviour. Others reject the idea of the 'real' entirely, suggesting that it is impossible and politically problematic to try to define and explain the social world scientifically. These theories each express a different assumption or social ontology about the world and the nature of its existence.

I teach my students to consider the fundamental differences between three ontological positions: **realism**, **idealism** and **scepticism**. Realism asserts that scientific theories can provide descriptions and explanations about the world that are approximately true. This position implies not only some kind of 'depth' to reality but also that it is possible to generate knowledge about its underlying mechanisms or causal laws. Realism is the basis for many social theories, including Marxism, functionalism and **critical realism**. Idealism, alternatively, assumes that our thoughts and ideas shape reality. It rejects the assumption that reality can exist independently of what is happening in our minds and suggests that human experience is vital in understanding what it is to exist in the world. Idealism is the basis for social theories, including phenomenology and **ethnomethodology**. Scepticism is altogether different again. It challenges the idea that we should be making these assumptions about the world. Sceptics recognise that there is politics and power involved in the creation of knowledge and 'truth' claims. As such, they question the foundations on which these claims are often made, thereby exposing any shortcomings in trying to define, explain (or control) what society is like. Scepticism forms the basis of the works of Nietzsche, Foucault and a range of postmodern, posthuman and new materialist thinkers.

There is also another dimension to knowledge within social theory: social epistemology. Social epistemology refers to how social theories intend to study what they think of as 'real' or not in the world. Crucially, social epistemology maps closely to social ontology as different theories match their assumptions about the world to the kinds of knowledge that they think essential to identify. For example, Chapter 4 discusses the 'positivism' of theorists like Comte and Durkheim. Positivism is an epistemology that suggests that the social sciences should generate knowledge about facts and causal laws similar to the natural sciences, often by collecting and analysing statistics. This perspective contrasts with the interpretive tradition (see Chapters 3 and 5), including the methodological works of Weber but also phenomenologists and phenomenological sociologists (see Chapter 5). These epistemological positions suggest that social research should look for knowledge that helps us understand people's beliefs and values by interpreting either what is happening in their heads or the methods by which they organise their daily lives.

Social ontology and epistemology are frequent themes throughout social theory because they shape the methods researchers adopt as they undertake their studies. It is important to recognise that our assumptions about the world shape the knowledge that we think is appropriate and relevant, informing the approaches we take to collecting and analysing data. As such, when reading social theory, always keep in mind the following questions:

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- What is this theory saying about the nature of society?
- What is this theory saying about the kinds of knowledge appropriate for the study of society?
- What are the types of method that might be relevant for use with this theory?

Modernity

The third and final theme is modernity. Generally speaking, the 'roots' of social theory typically concern what society is like, how it operates and the direction in which it is going. Early social theorists such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber all agree that there are some core socioeconomic and cultural features of this modern landscape and that these raise particular threats or problems for social consensus. These features include the shift from feudal to capitalist-based societies (see **feudalism** and **capitalism**) due to **industrialisation,** in which new types of working and living arrangements dramatically alter the fabric of social life. As Chapter 2 details, capitalism brings with it a shift from agricultural labour (farming) to factory-based wage relations focused on mass production. It also brings a new type of consumer and an urbanised populace: shopping and living within sprawling cities, rather than farming food or crafting their own clothes. Marx, Durkheim and Weber each find a way to contend with these features of modern societies. For example, Marx argues that modern societies organise work (or wage labour) in contradictory and exploitative ways. Durkheim argues that modern societies are responsible for an emerging **individualism** that is changing social and moral bonds (see Chapter 4). Weber argues that modernity brings **disenchantment** through new forms of social and economic organisation (see Chapter 3).

Alongside these central features are the **Enlightenment** and **secularism**: two broad movements in social thinking that contextualise early theorists' interest in modern societies. The Enlightenment refers to an intellectual and cultural movement from the eighteenth century onwards that emphasises science, reason and logic over and against non-rational beliefs and forms of social organisation such as religion or monarchy. The Enlightenment became integral to the self-understanding of modernity in Europe because it suggested that, for the first time in history, people could produce knowledge for social progress. Indeed, it is often associated with initiating key events, such as the French Revolution in 1789 (which eventually led to the collapse of the French monarchy), and the development of French sociology through writers like Alexis de Tocqueville, Claude Henri Saint-Simon, Comte and, later, Durkheim (see Ritzer, 2008, pp. 9–18). Indeed, many of the values of the Enlightenment, such as reason-based change, scientific innovation and social advancement, became a core part of Durkheim's vision for sociology as a science of society.

Linked closely to the Enlightenment is secularism: a movement that refers to the general decline in the significance of religious thinking and practices (in some countries) while also leading to the separation of religious affairs from the running of state institutions. Before

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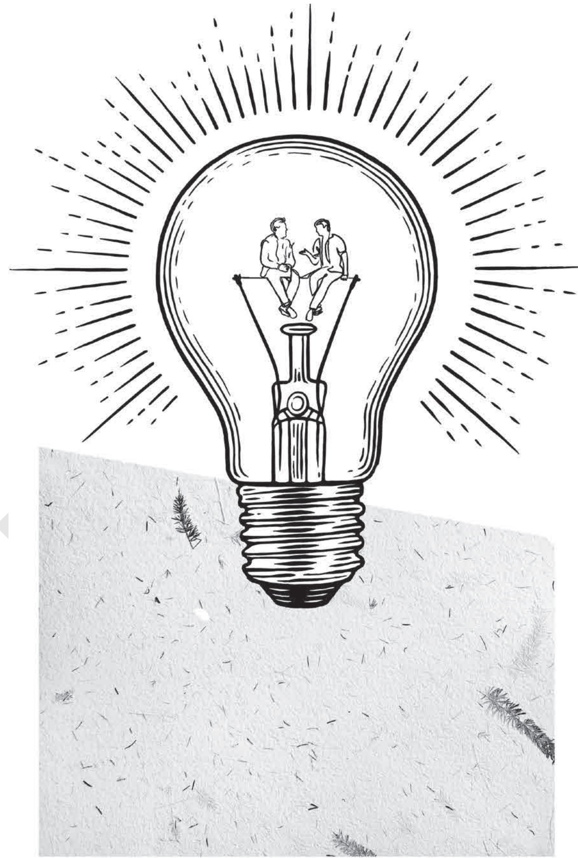

Figure 1.2 The Enlightenment

Some refer to the Enlightenment as a 'light bulb' moment in human history because of its role in generating new ideas informed by scientific research.

the Enlightenment, experts would produce knowledge about the world by translating and interpreting religious texts to explain what God and other deities had in mind for them. The Enlightenment brings a radical change of direction here: it brings the power of reason and rationality to these interpretations and, in many instances, reveals religion as a human creation full of contradictions and power relations. This is certainly the perspective of writers such as Nietzsche and Freud, who, as a result of science, question the value of religious belief and knowledge in the modern world (see Chapter 3). Secularism also shapes Weber's view of modernity, albeit from a different perspective. Weber describes the process of **rationalisation** through which logic and reason come to strip people and European societies of their religious values and beliefs, leading to an overarching absence of meaning and conviction.

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Since the 1960s, particularly with the emergence of poststructuralism (see Chapter 6), social theorists have increasingly tended to reflect on and challenge this idea of modernity and its central features. Indeed, the idea of 'postmodernity' speaks to moving beyond the assumption that societies have these overarching features (sometimes referred to as 'metanarratives'). A significant part of social theory has become about questioning the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which the idea of modernity rests and how theorists of modernity reinforce particular social and cultural biases. This is particularly apparent in feminism, where debates take place over the conceptualisation of inequality and patriarchy and how it reinforces binary categories of sex and gender (see Chapter 8). It is also apparent in postcolonial theory, which explicitly challenges the idea of the Enlightenment and its role in establishing European power through colonial and imperial conquest of other nations (see also Bhambra, 2007; Connell, 2007).

With these themes in mind, I now encourage you to explore the prominent thinkers, issues and debates in classical and contemporary social theory. I really hope that they inspire you to think, research and act about the world in new ways.

Summary

- This book offers many images, contemporary examples and other facts to support the reader in understanding the core message behind particular theoretical perspectives and ideas.
- There are many productive ways to 'think about theory' that make it easier to grasp. The first is to recognise that social theory is less a matter of just learning what theorists say and more about thinking about what we can learn from these ideas to use them to explain and understand the world. The second is to recognise that there are many plausible explanations for social phenomena or events, which is why it is vital to have a broad grasp of different theoretical perspectives. The third is to reflect on how theorists construct their own arguments in reasoned ways, starting with their assumptions about how the world works and then moving to prove those assumptions through research and evidence.
- We can also 'think about theory' in terms of the relationship between its different 'roots' and 'branches' and how different perspectives emerge around different ontological and epistemological assumptions.
- Some frequent themes run throughout social theory, including structure and agency, knowledge and modernity. Each one speaks to many of the similarities and differences between theoretical perspectives.

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Review Questions

- What are the main differences between conflict, consensus and action perspectives across social theories?
- What makes the following ontological perspectives different: realism, idealism and scepticism?
- What is the role of modernity in the development of social theory?

Annotated Reading

For a historical sketch of early social theory, notably the works of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, try George Ritzer's (2008) *Classical Sociological Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill), now in its fifth edition.

In the third edition of their book *Introducing Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press), Pip Jones and Liz Bradbury (2018) provide a more detailed introduction to the relationship between consensus, conflict and action perspectives.

Those interested in better understanding the role of social ontology and social epistemology in the research process will benefit from reading Michael Crotty's (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: Sage).

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