

# **The Not So Common Sense**

Differences in How People  
Judge Social and Political Life

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Yale University Press

New Haven and London

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## Chapter One Postmodernity, Not Learning, and the Not So Common Sense

In this book I explore the sense people make of the world around them, from the private world of their personal lives to the broader arena of social and political affairs. I provide theoretical argument and empirical evidence that there is an underlying structure to the disparate understandings and judgments that a given individual constructs. Whether one is trying to explain why a friend is unable to find a job or why unemployment is high in Germany, or whether one is trying to judge the desirability of a potential lover or the appropriateness of American military intervention in Bosnia, one is engaged in an activity, in thinking. In each case, there is a personal attempt to make sense of the particular event or choice. In the process, these concerns are given a subjectively reconstructed meaning and value. While the substance of the ensuing understandings and evaluations may vary with the question considered, they will all be structured in a way that reflects the distinctive qualities of the individual's own way of thinking.

By claiming that cognition is structured, I am clearly departing from psychological theory and research that adopt more piecemeal and non-

interpretative approaches to the analysis of cognitive functioning. This is not necessarily to deny the findings of this work, but to suggest that its results must be reconsidered. My aim here is to offer an overarching framework for explicating the findings of several of psychology's diverse research traditions. In particular I reexamine several strands of social psychological research on cognition and their relationship to developmental psychological research on the same topic.

The approach I adopt in this book also differs from interpretative sociologies, both classical and postmodern, that offer some reified notion of society and imply or directly assert that individuals are simply cultural products. These sociological views suggest that there is a material or intersubjectively defined social reality that structures interaction and discourse. The individuals that are incorporated in this scripted drama simply learn the actions, beliefs, and values required to play their parts. In this view, a person is her roles and her social identities. Contrary to such views of society and socialization, I am suggesting that the qualities of individuals' action are not so simply determined. In their attempt to make sense of their experience, individuals operate on the social demands placed upon them and the cultural messages to which they are exposed and reconstruct them in their own subjectively structured terms. This is not to suggest that this activity of reconstruction is necessarily or even commonly self-conscious. Nonetheless it is ever present and its effect is pervasive.

At the same time, I do not adopt an idealist position wherein objective and social realities dissolve into subjective constructions, nor do I adopt a psychological structuralism that suggests a universal cognition with no social or historical relativity. I avoid both by conceiving of thinking as an activity and viewing the formal structure of understanding and evaluation as its outcome. In this vein, I argue that thinking is pragmatically related to an external, primarily social environment. Consequently, the individual's attempt to define objects and establish relations among them is realized in interaction or discourse with others. This introduces an external and potentially transforming influence into the activity of thinking. At the same time that it is subjectively directed, thinking is also regulated and thereby reconstructed according to the terms of the interaction or discourse in which the individual is engaged.

Cast in these terms, my focus on subjectivity clearly does not exclude social and political considerations. To the contrary, I regard these concerns to be central, indeed analytically inseparable from more psychological ones. On one hand, social structure and culture are critically implicated in subjectivity as the setting in which reasoning is realized. As such, they stimulate or inhibit cognitive development and provide a basis for understanding individual differences



in reasoning. On the other hand, subjectivity is critical to the understanding of social structure and culture. As a mediator between social regulation and individual action, subjectivity contributes to the determination of the organization and definition of collective life. Ultimately, it is in the interplay, both interactive and discursive, between subjects that social life is realized and created. In the latter regard the analysis of subjectivity is seen as a point of entry for considering matters of social structure and culture. The intellectual strategy adopted here is that, armed with a more adequate understanding of subjectivity, one can then better analyze the nature and dynamic of collective life.

To introduce this approach and to provide an illustration of its potential contribution to social inquiry, let us consider two puzzling social phenomena. The first revolves around the failure of people to learn what is required of them even when the benefits of learning are high and the information required is readily available. The second pertains to the apparently stark differences between individuals in their capacity to learn and thereby to adapt to the demands of their immediate social environment. In both instances, discussion opens with some anecdotal evidence of the phenomenon in question. The fact that the relevant behavior is not readily understood becomes a basis for questioning the theoretical frameworks typically used to make sense of social and political life. The limits of these theories are then drawn upon to indicate the direction that should be taken to construct a more adequate framework for social and political inquiry.

#### **A FIRST PUZZLE: THE FAILURE TO LEARN**

Everyday social life is replete with examples of people's failure to learn what is required of them. Although occasionally acknowledged, this is rarely accorded much attention in social and political theory. Instead, it is the presumption of successful learning, or at least reasonably successful learning, that is often incorporated as a foundational claim in contemporary theorizing. In this context, failures to learn are simply ignored. When they are addressed, they are regarded as anomalous and are explained away. To ground a reconsideration of this issue, I offer several examples of failures to learn. The first addresses a general phenomenon, the apparent failure of most people to adapt to the demands of modern life. The remaining examples are much narrower in scope.

#### **The Crisis of Postmodernity**

There is a growing sense that the twentieth century has been a period of great, pervasive, and rapid change. Not simply a circumstantial matter of advanced

technologies, political institutions, and mass migrations, the changes that have taken place have permeated the social fabric and overturned whole ways of life. As the witnesses and subjects, we have seen these changes reflected in how we conceive of ourselves and others, how we have families, how we work, how we communicate, and how we collectively regulate our lives. In a world awash with the relativism of individualism, multiculturalism, globalization, and rapid social change, nothing seems particularly stable, bounded, or clear. Once stable patterns of social interaction have become increasingly uncertain and ill defined. As these regularities have evaporated, so have the sense and legitimacy of the social norms that are intended to reflect and govern them. In complementary fashion, the assumptions underlying everyday discourse are increasingly subject to questioning and doubt. Moreover, just as these common foundations are disintegrating, the previously accepted means for negotiating disagreement seem to be losing their authority.

To many of us, this changing social landscape appears complex and bewildering, an arena in which one is readily lost. We are aware that transformations are taking place, but we generally do not understand what they now involve or where they will lead. The present lack of concrete rules and clear answers breeds a disorienting and occasionally frightening sense of uncertainty, meaninglessness, and lack of direction. At moments, this condition is eulogized in popular culture, for example, in the violent nihilism of such contemporary films as the American *Pulp Fiction* or the British *Trainspotting*. It is also reflected in the amorality of African-American rap music and the skepticism of the lyrics such as those of the Canadian Alanis Morissette and the Irish Sinead O'Connor. It is also evident in the fragmented, ill-defined selves of such characters as the hero of E. L. Doctorow's *City of God* (2000).

For the most part, however, this confrontation with postmodernity has led to various attempts to escape the vicissitudes of contemporary life and to recapture some familiar, more concrete form of certainty and guidance. This is reflected in a proliferation of everything from self-help books like *I'm Okay, You're Okay* (Harris, 1967) and *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) to new spiritualist and neotraditionalist religious movements. As refuge, each of these solutions provides a confirming, sympathetic acknowledgment of the paralyzing confusion of postmodern life. This is accompanied by denial of the complexities of the postmodern circumstance and a relatively simple statement of what a person concretely can and should be doing. Alternatively people have sought the desired certainty and direction in ritual and routine. The relief offered by these routines, be they of the church, the work-

place, or the gymnasium, is evident in the energy verging on desperation with which they are sustained.<sup>1</sup> Still others can see no solution and thus attempt to disengage from the postmodern world. They seek refuge in a variety of rejections: in nature, in regressive social movements, and in simple emotional isolation. This then is the crisis of postmodernity—one in which people are asked to inhabit a world that they cannot understand, cannot feel comfortable with, and cannot do what is required of them. It is a crisis that grows as the realities of postmodernity reach out to colonize and transform ever more of the residual nooks and crannies of everyday interaction which bear the mark of premodern modes of exchange.

Cast in these terms, the crisis is, at its core, the result of a failure to learn and adapt. At a collective level, the quality of cultural definition and social regulation is changing. Traditional and hierarchical organization with its clear center, its authoritatively determined definitions of social circumstances, and its concrete directions for action is giving way to a new order. This change is being propelled by several forces: the personal independence and critical attitude fostered by a democratization of politics, the fragmentation of cultural authority produced by multiculturalism and globalization, and the veneration of novelty and efficiency nurtured by capitalism and science. Of course, much of life is still traditional, but the purview of tradition is diminishing and even in those settings where its authority has been strongest, for example, the family or the religious community, fundamental changes are occurring.

In the new emergent regime, there is an increasing demand that, in the various locales of daily interaction, people actively negotiate and thereby create the meaning and the conditions of their exchange. From the workplace to the sports venue to the home, traditional cognitive strategies involving the knowledge and application of authoritative definition and “common sense” is proving less effective. To deal with the relative uncertainties of postmodern exchange, individuals are now being asked to develop new cognitive orientations. The aim is to be able to engage in a cooperative effort with others to create, sustain, and, when necessary, reconstruct the definitions, values, and rules that govern their interaction. To do this effectively, individuals must learn to critically assess current practice and belief, imaginatively consider possible alternatives, and do so with regard to the present and potential understandings and interests of both themselves and the others with whom they are engaged.

Viewed in these terms, the cognitive requirements of contemporary life increasingly demand a level of abstraction, integration, and hypothetical thinking beyond what is required to satisfactorily meet the demands of traditional

life. To facilitate the development of these skills, the culture is replete with the necessary definitions and exemplars. These are displayed in film, books, and television through both fictionalized and documentary accounts. Similarly, the social structure offers a number of settings in which to learn and practice what is necessary. These include such diverse sites as schools, psychotherapy, and management training. In this way, individuals are provided information and direction they need to self-reflect, self-direct, and if necessary self-reconstruct, while at the same time developing the capacity for critique, generating alternatives, and cooperatively engaging others.

The problem is that most people are not meeting these demands. They are not learning what they need to do and who they need to be. This is the case despite the fact that the requisite direction and the opportunities to learn are provided. It is important to keep in mind that this failure to learn occurs even though the costs of such a failure are high. The individual is left to confront a world that she does not understand. In its incomprehensibility, this world becomes one that is unpredictable, bereft of meaning and value, and populated by strangers. The result is personal disorientation, isolation, and anxiety. At the same time, this failure undermines the social life that individuals share in common. Insofar as individuals are unable to coordinate their exchange under these new conditions, this shared arena becomes increasingly disintegrated, uncertain, and potentially dangerous.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Appalachian Reform, Chad Health Aid, and University Instruction**

The key question raised here is why people fail to learn the skills and orientations required when the necessary information is widely available and the rewards are great enough to motivate the requisite learning. To complement our consideration of broad social changes, let us consider several specific examples of the failure to learn where the rewards are high and the information is readily available. One such example is provided by the experience of a friend, John, who was a community organizer in Appalachia. His experience parallels that of many reform-minded activists who attempt to have an impact on local communities. Although he came to the mountains with the general aim of political empowerment, this was often realized in a more specific effort to teach miners how to utilize the local government services available to them. Typically John spent six months in a small mining town gaining the confidence of the local people and giving them civic instruction. An exemplary case was his instruction on the use of a petition to request the installation of a traffic light at an un-

regulated street corner where a number of school children had been injured. John told the local people that the town government would respond to such a request. He also showed them how to get the necessary forms, fill them out, and gather support from parents and then how to submit the request. At each step, the local people did the required activity themselves, but John was there to instruct and support. Shortly after the request was submitted, the town bureaucracy responded positively and several months later a traffic light was installed. Approximately a year later John returned to the town only to discover that virtually none of the skills he had taught had been employed in his absence. This result was puzzling. Why did the people not seem to learn from the instruction they had been given? The presentation of information was clear, the opportunity to practice the skills in question was taken, and the rewards for performance were tangible and significant. Yet no further changes had been instigated. No enduring learning was evident.

Another illustrative example is offered by the experience of a friend's brother, David, who was working for the Peace Corps in Chad. David stayed in one region of Chad for more than a year. A friendly and sensitive man, David was well liked by most of the people with whom he dealt. One serious problem David encountered in this region was water contamination. The water was infested with microscopic larvae. When imbibed, the larvae lodged in various parts of the body. With time the larvae grew into worms which could reach several inches in length. These worms then slowly ate their way out of the body. Reaching the skin, they would break through and slowly exit. The native population had learned that if they simply pulled at the worms, they would break and life-threatening infection would follow. They did not, however, recognize that the worms came from the water.

David's aim was to teach the local people that the water should be chemically treated or boiled before drinking. He would explain that the eggs were too tiny to see, they entered the body when someone drank untreated water and later grew into the quite visible worms. His explanation was typically greeted with some combination of amusement and friendly dismissal. It was obvious that no worms could be seen in the supposedly contaminated water. If they could not be seen, how could one assume that they were there? A resourceful man, David developed what he assumed would be a persuasive response. He brought along a small bowl of finely ground cayenne pepper. He instructed the person or people he was talking to dip their forefinger in the pepper and then asked them blow the pepper off. Once this was done, he asked them if they saw any pepper. They responded that they did not. He then asked each individual to put his or

her own finger in her own eye. They refused. When he asked why, they responded that there was pepper on their finger and it would sting. David then made his point: the pepper was there and able to sting even if they could not see it. It was the same with the worms. This reasoning by analogy had no impact on the audience. In a dozen or more attempts, almost no one was convinced. Even more interesting, it became clear to David that the relevance of his pepper experiment was not recognized at all. It was simply regarded as some sort of humorous aside.

David's experience is puzzling. He was addressing an issue—the worms—that was of substantial interest to his audience; their lives were potentially at stake. Moreover the people clearly had no adequate way of combating the problem. Still they did not learn from the information David gave them nor did they follow the instructions for decontamination. Perhaps it is easier to account for why David's direct information regarding the genesis of the worms was not utilized. As an outsider, he may have lacked the requisite credibility to be believed. Alternatively his instructions may somehow have inadvertently contradicted those of tribal authorities. What is more difficult to understand is why the argument by analogy with the pepper was deemed so uninformative that it did not evoke any agreement and so wholly irrelevant it did not even necessitate any real counter. It is as if the audience simply could not draw the requisite inference from one set to another set of circumstances in which the substantive elements involved differed.

One final example draws more directly on an experience many readers of this book share, that is, the experience of the classroom. In the course of the eight, ten, or fourteen weeks of a term, we offer students lecture and reading regarding a particular subject matter. As part of the materials presented, students are provided both specific facts and general theoretical frameworks with which to interpret those facts. For the most part, the latter is emphasized over the former. We are often explicit about the importance of theory as the context in which available facts are rendered meaningful and potential implications may be drawn. The books we use tend to emphasize this point as well. On occasion the role of theory may be graphically illustrated by juxtaposing frameworks and indicating that not only do they lead to conflicting claims, but the concerns deemed central in one theoretical context may not even be addressed in another.

The common result of these pedagogical efforts is evident in extended conversations, term papers, or essay examinations where it is clear that some students seem to appreciate the issues raised. They self-consciously attempt to use theories to order the disparate facts and ideas presented to them. But often the

majority of students are unable to do this. Despite the classroom focus on interpretative frameworks or theoretical positions, the students seem simply unable to assimilate or use the information given. We know this is not simply a matter of some being motivated to learn and others not. When we get the chance to know our students, it is often clear that those who do understand in the manner required do so relatively effortlessly. More important, many of those who do not understand are clearly motivated and hard working. Their effort is evident in the large number of specific facts they have accumulated. Their failure is apparent in their inability to present these facts in an integrative, self-consciously interpretive fashion.

The foregoing examples are intended to supplement the more general case of the failure to develop the cognitive skills required to adapt to postmodern life. The Appalachian miners, the Chad natives, and the university students are all presented with data about problems that are important to them. Learning opens up the possibility of improving the everyday conditions of the miners, the possibility of combating dangerous and painful infestation of the natives, and the possibility of succeeding in university and gaining the social approval and advancement which follows. Yet like the members of postmodern society, most of the individuals in these specific cases do not learn.

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE PUZZLE**

For many of us as social scientists, this failure to learn is puzzling. This is because the implicit understanding or framework we typically utilize to make sense of the problem does not allow us to readily comprehend what is going on. To the contrary, it leads us to expect that where the information is presented and the motivation to assimilate it is there, people will learn what they need to know. This is especially true when the concerns are the practical ones of everyday life. In this regard, the foregoing examples and the crisis of postmodernity itself are not only enigmatic, they constitute potentially disconfirming instances of the theories that orient our social understanding. To illustrate, let us consider two basic perspectives that orient most current social scientific thinking about social and political life.

### **The Liberal Institutional Perspective**

The perspective that orients most Anglo-American analysis of social and political life is a liberal institutional one. With its roots in the liberal tradition from

John Locke through John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, this perspective underlies most contemporary analysis of governmental institutions and public policy. It is perhaps most elegantly reflected in neoclassical economics, especially in its application to social and political issues.<sup>3</sup>

This liberal institutional perspective is based on certain core assumptions regarding human nature and social life. A first assumption is that, for the most part, individuals accurately perceive the elements of the essentially objective world around them. Like the physical world, social interaction has an objective quality to it. As a result, because individuals do perceive accurately, the basic components of social life are transparent to those who engage in it. In a manner consistent with this basic claim, it is also recognized that perception may be subject to interference. One problem that may arise is that of the availability of information. This becomes an issue when social interactions are embedded in larger contexts where relevant factors may be remote or otherwise obscure. Another problem that may arise is one of motivation. The issue here is whether individuals are sufficiently motivated to attend to and make use of the information that is available. While these problems of information availability and motivation are recognized, they are regarded as secondary concerns. Except where these problems are particularly evident, it is assumed that all people can recognize the basic elements of the social environment in which they act.

A second core assumption underlying the liberal institutional perspective assumption is that individuals have the capacity to reason. In this context, this means that individuals can integrate the pieces of information they accumulate in a manner which reflects the actual relationships among the various elements of social exchange being considered. In the process, causal and categorical inferences can be drawn. The result is a working understanding of the social environment. This is then drawn upon to determine the probable effects of the various courses of action that the individual may adopt.

A third and final core assumption is that individuals have preferences. These preferences consist of the things that people want or seek to avoid. So defined, these preferences are objective. They are subjectively held, but they are defined and differentiated from one another in terms of the particular external objects (e.g., money, food, and others' approval) to which they refer. Drawing on the reasoned understanding of a situation, these preferences guide the individual's choices and motivate their behavior. The result is calculated, goal-oriented action initiated by individuals with the aim of maximizing personal satisfaction in light of the limits and possibilities inherent in existing circumstances.

Together these three assumptions define the nature of individuals. This then



provides a basis for deducing the nature and dynamic of the social arena in which individuals interact. In simplified form, individuals engage one another in the attempt to satisfy their interests. When unregulated, this interaction becomes unpredictable and potentially dissatisfying or dangerous for all parties involved. To minimize these costs, individuals enter into agreements, tacit or explicit, for regulating their exchange.<sup>4</sup> These regulations and the manner in which they are enforced constitute the institutions that govern everyday life. In essence, these institutions achieve their effects by determining the costs and benefits associated with the various action alternatives available in the exchange being regulated. By virtue of their capacity to perceive and reason, individuals understand how this institutional regulation affects the manner in which their interests may be best satisfied. Guided by this calculus, they behave accordingly. This may include an attempt to renegotiate the regulations that govern them.

This constitutes the skeletal core of the liberal institutionalist perspective. It has spawned a family of social and political theories. Central to all these analyses is the interplay between individuals and institutions. On one hand, the focus is on the effect of individuals on institutions. It is here where significant differences among the various perspectives initially emerge. At issue is the solution to the practical problem of how to best facilitate the process of translating individual preferences and goals into collectively agreed upon regulatory policy. On the other hand, the various theories also deal with the reciprocal part of the social dynamic, the effect of institutions on individuals. Here, however, there is basic agreement. This is not so much a matter of explicit analysis as tacit assumption. In a matter consistent with the liberal view of human nature, it is assumed that individuals have the requisite perceptual and reasoning capacities to learn how their environment is structured. Put in other terms, individuals learn. When the information is available and sufficiently consequential, people will learn how to behave in the manner required to maximize their satisfactions and to minimize their pain. This may take some time (a matter of months or a few years), particularly if there are newly institutionalized arrangements that significantly conflict with previously adopted beliefs and practices. However, people will learn the new structure of reward and punishment and their attitudes and behavior will change in the manner required.<sup>5</sup>

This assumption of learning is one of the cornerstones of the liberal institutional understanding of social life. The problem, of course, is that our analysis of postmodernity and the examples of the Appalachian miners, the Chad natives, and the university students suggest that this assumption is not completely

correct. In the general case and the three more specific ones, the information is available, the incentives are great, and the motivation is manifestly there. There also has been time to experience, observe, and understand. For the Chad natives, this was a matter of several hours or days. For the miners, it was six months. For the students, the learning session could be viewed as extending for the length of a term or the three or four years of their university education. In the case of postmodernity, the opportunity to learn is not a matter of months or years, but lifetimes and generations. Still most people did not learn and do not seem capable of learning what is necessary.

In sum, the liberal institutional perspective offers an understanding of social life and a framework for analysis that is predicated in part on certain psychological assumptions which suggest people learn to behave in a way required by the changing conditions of everyday life. In these terms, the failure of people to adapt to the demands of social exchange constitutes not only a puzzle, but also a challenge to the very core of the liberal institutional understanding. An attempt can be made to explain the phenomena away. Failing this, some basic theoretical reconstruction is demanded. Rather than rendering the failure to learn as anomalous, new theory must redefine human nature and social life such that this phenomenon is comprehensible, even ordinary.

### **The Sociological Alternative**

A second approach commonly adopted is sociological. In part, this approach stands in opposition to that of the liberal institutionalist. It has its roots in the conservative<sup>6</sup> and romantic<sup>7</sup> rejections of liberalism that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These critics focused on the social troubles of the time ranging from urban poverty and prostitution to increasing crime rates and violent political revolution. They understood these phenomena to be an outgrowth of cultural developments and public policy based on liberalism's misconception of society and social life. In particular, both conservatives and romantics viewed liberal claims regarding rationality and self-direction with extreme skepticism. In their view, people are not particularly rational or self-directing. To the degree to which individuals are able to comprehend something or direct their action appropriately, this is not a matter of reason, rationality, and reflection but rather is the product of faith, intuition, or feeling. The latter serve to connect individuals to something higher or more general than their particular selves. Existing beyond individuals, this transcendent community is typically ascribed an essentially mystical quality. Although it therefore may not be fully known, it is nonetheless a real social force. It can shape so-

cial exchange and is thereby capable of directing and even transforming the individual. Thus the community, be it spiritual, natural, or social, becomes key. It is viewed as the true source of meaning, value, and proper direction.

In this light, it is argued that the liberal reliance on the individual as the foundation for political and moral analysis is mistaken. Viewed from this conservative perspective, it is apparent that the collectivity, not the individual, is the appropriate point for departure for any understanding or evaluation of social life. In a manner consistent with the epistemological skepticism of this view, the vehicle for this journey is not reason. Given the tremendous complexity or depth of what is to be known and the individual's limited cognitive abilities, reason cannot be expected to take one very far. Rather, it is on faith or insight that people must rely. Even proceeding on this basis, the transcendent nature of community demands a humble recognition of the limited understanding that any one individual embarking on this journey can acquire.

In the mid and late nineteenth century, this mystical recognition of the centrality of the community gave way to a more scientific and reasoned attempt to understand the inherent nature of society. The earlier extraindividual focus and the anchoring of knowledge and value in the community were retained. The spiritualism, however, was rejected. Instead, attempts were made to understand the collectivity. This was fueled by a somewhat liberal faith, albeit one necessarily dampened by a recognition of the structuring influence of history and culture, in the technical and emancipatory potential of reasoning and reflection. Karl Marx's work was particularly seminal in this regard. The result was the emergence of the sociological point of view.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to liberal institutional formulation, most classical sociological analyses regard individuals as a secondary or derivative concern. Individuals—that is, their thoughts, preferences, and actions—are conceived of as a social outcome rather than a social cause. In his *Rules of Sociological Method*, Emile Durkheim explicitly cautions against any sociological analysis that builds on assumptions regarding human nature or choice.<sup>9</sup> In an essay written some seventy years later, Louis Althusser takes the position even further and argues that the very ideas of individuality, self, and purposive behavior were themselves socially structured, ideological outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Instead of beginning with the individual, sociological analyses focus on the inherent structure of the collectivity. Description and explanation are cast in terms of society itself. Consequently, any elements of the analysis, the social objects described, or the social forces identified are understood to be internally differentiated aspects of the collectivity (e.g., classes or discourses). In this context, the activities of individ-

ual members of a society are assumed to be collectively caused and culturally signified. The claim here is that social action (be it a behavior or verbal statement) is organized and therefore determined and defined at an interpersonal, interactive, or discursive level. As a result, even a direct consideration of individuals returns us back to extraindividual and essentially social concerns.

In spite of this self-conscious attempt to avoid basing social analysis on any psychological claims, foundational psychological claims nevertheless are made, if only implicitly. Moreover, they are quite central to the sense of the sociological approach. Most sociologists clearly reject any cognitive claims that individuals are inherently logical, fully self-reflective reasoning beings. That said, they cannot avoid making alternative cognitive claims of their own.<sup>11</sup> Allowing that individuals are not born aware of all the meanings and regulations of social life, it is clear that they must have the basic capacities to learn them. In this regard, even the most militantly antipsychological sociologist is forced to base her analysis on certain inescapably psychological assumptions. First, it must be assumed that an individual is capable of perceiving both general cultural messages and direct behavioral feedback in a reasonably accurate way. This assumption is quite similar to that made by the liberal institutional analyst. Second, it must also be assumed that an individual can integrate what she perceives at least to the point of constructing chunks of learning, each of which is sufficiently elaborated such that it can be used to identify relevant social situations and guide the individual's action in them. The cognitive claims regarding reasoning made here certainly attribute more limited capacity to individuals than do most liberal analyses of rationality. Nonetheless, there is a claim regarding reasoning, one quite consistent with the orientation adopted in contemporary social psychological research on schemas.<sup>12</sup> Third, it must be assumed that an individual will in fact utilize these perceptual and cognitive capacities when sufficiently motivated to do so. Together these three assumptions define the sociological conception of the psychology of learning. Typically this process of learning is referred to as socialization. Because the psychological side, the actual learning, is assumed, sociological analyses of socialization focus on the social and political processes that determine the content of the "lesson."

Although the capacity of individuals to learn what socialization demands of them is largely a matter of assumption, the claim is a critical one. Although society may be its own immanent cause and thus be self-structuring, this immanence and structuration is virtual. It is realized only in the concrete and specific ways in which people act toward or converse with one another. That said, this dependence on individuals and their action for the realization of society is not

seen as either problematic or complicating. There are two reasons for this: (1) the only structuring or organizing force operating is that of the collectivity and (2) individuals have the capacity and the motivation to perceive social influences and learn from them. Therefore, the manner in which social structure is expressed in the concrete behavior of interacting individuals is not a particular problem for the sociological perspective. For the most part, one can assume it simply happens. People can learn and therefore are socialized to behave in the manner required. With this issue safely dealt with as a matter of presupposition, one can then turn to the more central business of understanding the quality, trajectory, and conditions of change of those transcendent, virtual social forces. Where there is an apparent failure of socialization, one simply assumes that society is internally contradictory (the Marxist solution) or fragmented (the postmodernist solution). In this light, the issue is not a failure of socialization. It is not that people are not learning. Rather the problem stems from a mistaken conception of the forces that constitute the socializing influences to which the individual is exposed.

The foregoing theoretical presuppositions regarding socialization, particularly its psychological dimension, are challenged by the present circumstances of postmodernity. Despite a social environment replete with direct messages, substantial reinforcements, and practical opportunities, individuals do not seem to develop the understanding and emotional orientation that their socialization demands. Like the liberal institutional perspective it rejects, the sociological approach cannot make sense of this failure to adapt. Sociologists may try to explain it away by referring to the countervailing, if waning, influence of the traditional culture being eclipsed. Thus they may suggest that people will adapt, but more time is required. Alternatively, they may argue that the very fragmentation of postmodern culture limits the degree to which postmodernity can penetrate the whole of a postmodern society. These accounts have some merit, but traditional forms of exchange have been largely eclipsed. Older forms, for example, the institution of marriage, persist in name but have taken on a distinctly postmodern quality. In addition, the reach of postmodernity may vary across the various subpopulations of a society, but its effect is widely felt nonetheless. The contemporary realities of mass communication, the global integration of previously local or national markets, the demands of “bottom line” capitalist economics, and the advancement of the politics of individual rights and cultural equality suggest that even those who may be affected less are still importantly affected. To be brief, I do not find this sociological finesse of the problem of the failure to adapt—which is essentially to

suggest that the reason most people are not postmodern is because postmodernity has not yet reached them—particularly persuasive.

In sum, the two basic perspectives that inform most contemporary social and political analysis assume a view of learning and socialization which leaves little conceptual space for understanding the difficulty individuals are having adapting to the conditions of postmodern life. Nor do they provide much leverage for understanding why the Appalachian miners, Chad natives, and university students fail to learn. (The sociological view may lend itself to explaining away the cases of the miners and natives with reference to cross-cutting social influences, but the case of the university students, who see the requisite learning as clearly to their advantage, is less easily dealt with.) To better address the phenomena, the analysis of the effect of institutions or society on individuals must be expanded in two related respects: (1) the nature of learning must be reconceptualized and (2) the distinction between the individual and society must be more clearly recognized and sustained. I will consider each of these two suggestions in turn.

### **An Inadequate Conception of Learning**

An implicit assumption that orients both liberal institutional and sociological analyses is that all social and political learning is of the same basic type or qualitative nature. Arguably this is not the case. Some learning tasks seem manifestly more difficult than others. They demand something qualitatively different from the learner. For example, the requirements of learning algebra are clearly greater than the requirements of learning addition. For the most part, addition requires a simple recognition of numbers and a memorization of tables of sums. Algebra is not so dependent on memorization. More central is the assimilation of the logic of algebraic formulation and problem solving. Similarly, the task of learning another's point of view is inherently more complex than that of learning certain basic civilities. In the case of civilities, one need learn only specific behaviors (e.g., how to respond to another's greeting or how to eat with a knife and fork) and the particular situations in which to apply them. Like addition, this is a matter of recognition and memory. In the case of making sense of another's point of view, the task is more complicated. Beyond the simple recognition of specific claims the other person makes, it requires inference and inductive reconstruction regarding the presuppositions and linkages that underlie her way of making sense of things. Like algebra, this is a matter of understanding the general logic of how associations are made.

While analysts adopting either a liberal institutional or sociological approach would probably acknowledge these differences, neither approach incorporates a recognition of these differences as a significant, much less a central, element of the theoretical understanding it offers. And yet I would argue that the conceptualization of these differences and their implications must be central to any social theory that can address the failures as well as the successes of socialization and adaptation. Indeed, the difference between the learning of addition and civilities, on one hand, and the learning of algebra and how another person thinks, on the other hand, suggests the kind of distinction that may be critical in understanding the defining requirements of postmodern life and the difficulty individuals may have in adapting to them. In a sense, the accommodation to the demands of traditionally regulated social environments has much the same quality as learning addition or specific civilities. Traditional life is a matter of specific authoritative dictates regarding what specifically to do and when. The requisite behaviors along with the circumstances of their enactment must be recognized and remembered. Similarly, the accommodation to postmodern social life seems to make cognitive demands similar to those of learning algebra or making sense of another's way of thinking. In both instances, learning requires integration, abstraction, and interpretative reconstruction.

Regardless of any specific theoretical claims regarding how the relevant distinctions should be drawn, the key point here is that an understanding of the crisis of postmodernity (understood as a failure of adaptation) requires a framing of the issue in which distinctions among different types of learning must be made. This must include a specification of the different cognitive demands that different types of learning require. The net result would be a cognitively differentiated typology of forms of social action and discourse. This could be utilized to differentiate among types of social environments and the demands and difficulties associated with the change from one type to another. Developed in this manner, such a typology could then provide a basis for a social psychological analysis of the transition from traditional to postmodern life or of the more specific instances of the learning required of the Appalachian miners, Chad natives, or university students.

### **Social and Psychological Reductionism**

Another limit of liberal institutional and sociological theorizing is that, at least for analytical purposes, they effectively reduce society to its constituent individuals or vice versa. Viewed from the perspective of the liberal institutionalist, social life is only what individuals create. Because of the limits of what people

know, their actions may lead to unintended consequences. However, institutional and cultural realities are nonetheless defined relative to the action strategies and beliefs of the individuals involved. From the sociologist's perspective, conceptual priorities are reversed. Social life is an irreducibly collective creation. This creation may be fragmented and internally contradictory, but it is still an extraindividual phenomenon. Who individuals are, what they believe and do, is thus publicly constituted and defined. Thus in both frames of reference, the difference between the individual and the society is eliminated or minimized. Along with an undifferentiated concept of learning, this reductionism constitutes the frame of reference that supports liberal institutionalist and sociological assumptions of successful learning and social adaptation.

The problem is that the case of the failure of individuals to adapt to postmodern life contravenes these reductionist premises. In a contrary manner, it suggests a basic disjuncture between culturally dictated meanings and socially structured interaction on one hand and subjectively reconstructed understanding and personally directed action on the other. Indeed, the whole issue of adaptation is premised on the existence of this disjuncture. It is because individuals do not have a subjective orientation that corresponds to how their social environment is organized and defined that adaptation is necessary. Further and even more significantly, the failure of adaptation indicates that this lack of correspondence between the collective and the individual persists despite considerable social and psychological pressure to bring them into agreement. This suggests that the disjuncture of the collective and the individual is not merely a passing phase of development, but rather a central feature of social life.

Consequently, any attempt to understand the failure of individuals to adapt to the conditions of postmodern life must move beyond the reductionism of the liberal institutionalism or sociology orienting most contemporary theorizing. New theory must be premised on a recognition that the individual and society are fundamentally distinct forces driving social interaction and discourse. This is not simply a matter of distinguishing levels of analysis, each with its own separate domain of concerns. The problem of adaptation suggests that the individual and society operate on the common terrain of what people do and say to one another. Two consequences follow. First, insofar as individual and collective meaning and action are structured differently, they may offer conflicting direction to social exchange. The manner in which this exchange actually unfolds is therefore rendered intrinsically somewhat uncertain. It could be personally or socially dictated. Second, through this uncertain but common terrain, the individual and society are intertwined and each exerts a potentially



restructuring or transformative influence on the other. Development, be it collective or individual, must be understood accordingly.

To summarize, the failure of individuals to adapt to the demands of post-modern social life cannot be comprehended from the two perspectives, liberal institutional and sociological, which orient most social analysis and public policy. The problem is that both perspectives assume that learning or socialization will occur. This assumption is supported by other allied assumptions regarding the basic similarity of all social learning and a de facto reduction of either the individual or society to the analytical terms of the other. The crisis of adaptation thus demands moving beyond these two analytical perspectives. Such a theoretical move must be predicated on a recognition that (1) there are qualitatively different kinds of learning tasks which different social formations may set, (2) both the individual and society each constitutes a structuring force which orchestrates thought and action, and (3) these two structuring forces may define and organize social life in distinctive and more or less incompatible ways. Only within such a frame of reference may the current crisis of post-modernity be fruitfully comprehended.

**A SECOND BASIC PUZZLE:  
NONCOMMON MEANING**

Thus far we have focused on the problem posed by what people don't learn and what they seem unable to understand. Here we introduce a second issue, that of differences between people in what they are able to learn and understand. This raises another set of critical concerns regarding the more standard approaches to social analysis and provides further direction for the construction of a better alternative.

In the discussion of postmodernity, emphasis was placed on the pervasive failure of people to adapt to the emerging conditions of interaction and discourse. This failure to learn was underscored in the examples of the Appalachian miners, Chad natives, and university students. What was obscured in the discussion of each case was the otherwise obvious fact that whereas many or most do not learn, some do. There are many people who do seem capable of accommodating to the conditions of postmodern life. They succeed in constructing a more autonomous self and are able to forge a more cooperative and constructive connection with certain other people and their community. Similarly, in the case of the specific examples mentioned, there were natives who did come to understand the genesis of the worms, miners who did learn how to

manipulate the local government, and students who do learn the logic as well as the rhetoric of the theories to which they are exposed.

When considering these differences in what people are able to learn, it is important to keep in mind that in all cases the incentives to learn are substantial and consequently the motivation to learn is commensurately high. Therefore differences in learning suggests, at least in part, that there are basic differences in cognitive capacity. The way in which people reason may differ and as a result so will the quality of what they perceive and the kind of understanding they can make of those perceptions. These differences are reflected in the distinctions they can learn to make and the connections they can learn to draw. It is important to emphasize that the individual differences in cognition being referred to here are not simply a matter of specific knowledge or training. To reiterate the mantra of pragmatists and linguists in the Wittgensteinian tradition, the key issue here is not what people know, but how they know. This shifts the focus from the particular facts that people have learned to the subjective system of meaning into which those facts are assimilated. In this context, it is recognized that different people may understand the same statements or behaviors in fundamentally different ways. This will be evident in their differing capacities to learn and thus in the different kinds of behavioral or discursive strategies people are able to pursue.

Before going further, let me acknowledge that the issue of individual differences in cognition may be an explosive one. The political ramifications are potentially serious and noxious. Following a conservative tradition, some might argue that an individual's political opportunity and power should be commensurate with her intellectual ability. Those people who reason less well should be given less responsibility over themselves and others. Given the structural pragmatic view of reasoning that I present in chapter 2, such a view makes no theoretical sense. As I have argued in earlier work, the development of reasoning depends on having the power and opportunity to act. Environments that present individuals with greater challenges and the opportunity to respond are likely to facilitate intellectual development. In complementary fashion, environments that are more restrictive and repressive are likely to obstruct this development.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, several well-meaning colleagues have argued that the claims I make regarding individual differences in reasoning are readily extracted from the general theoretical framework. As such these claims may be easily misused with noxious political implications and therefore should not be made at all. I disagree. I do not believe that the reality of differences—one that is as apparent to the casual observer as to the trained investigator—should be

ignored in a presumably polite or politic fashion. In my view, the attempt to construct a social or political understanding which contradicts people's everyday experience is self-undermining and itself potentially dangerous. Significant differences in how people reason and therefore in what they are capable of understanding are manifest and omnipresent facts that must be addressed by any adequate social, political, or indeed moral theory. Only then can social and political realities be persuasively comprehended and public policy be effectively influenced.

The nature of these differences in how people reason is a central concern of this book. To give the reader a preliminary sense of the kinds of distinctions made, let us consider several examples. The first is anecdotal. When I first began teaching, my classes were relatively small and I was able to have direct contact with students. One result was that my office hours were often used by students not only as a supplement to class time but as an opportunity for a mix of secular confession and casual therapy. In one such case, a pair of Iranian students, a heterosexual couple, visited my office regularly for a term. On several occasions the discussion wandered in the direction of their current relationship and impending marriage. The woman was somewhat dissatisfied with the relationship and her lover could not really understand why. He argued that the two of them shared all that was necessary for a successful relationship. They had similar backgrounds; they were both Iranians raised in California. They shared friends in common. They liked to do the same things and enjoyed the same kinds of entertainment. Finally, they enjoyed a satisfying sex life. On this basis, he concluded that all was well and he could not understand the woman's dissatisfaction. In her turn, the woman acknowledged the truth of what the man had said. However, she indicated there was something else of concern. In the course of her four years at university, she had been exposed to a number of new ideas. Her way of thinking about the world was beginning to change. She had begun to reflect on her beliefs and values. She wondered about how they emerged, how they were related to one another, and if they were correct. It worried her that her lover did not appreciate her inquiry nor was he apparently willing or able to participate in it. In this light, she did not feel understood or properly connected to the man. Responding to her comments, he admitted not understanding the meaning of what she was talking about, but he was also not particularly concerned. Indeed, he argued that the whole issue was not significant. After all, her concerns did not affect the day to day of what they did together, their friendships, or the other factors he had identified as central to a good relationship.

From my perspective, the failed communication between these two lovers was not a matter of specific knowledge or preferences. Rather it reflected a basic, structural difference in how they conceptualized people and relationships. In the man's case, a person was conceived of as the collection of specific behaviors she performed and the preferences she voiced. A relationship between individuals was based on common membership in a group and in the commonalities of what they did, believed, and preferred. From the woman's perspective, the foregoing was relevant but not complete or even central. In her view, a person was the ideas she had and how she made sense of them. The issue was not the specific content of the ideas but how those ideas were integrated and understood. Similarly, the relationship between people involved a process of coming to an understanding, and thus a true recognition, of one another. This did not depend so much on shared features, but rather on an appreciation and respect for differences. Whereas the man's social reasoning was somewhat fragmented, categorical, and oriented to concrete specifics, the woman's reasoning was more integrative, abstract, and general in orientation. As a result, the realities of the social relationship differed for the two partners. Each conceived the substance and value of what they ostensibly shared in very different terms.

The following excerpts from two in-depth interviews provide a second example of qualitative differences in reasoning. These excerpts offer the reader an opportunity for a direct comparison of differences. The interview involved a discussion of a significant other. The interviewee was free to choose whom he or she wanted to discuss. Typically people chose to discuss a close friend, spouse, or lover. Once chosen, the interviewee was asked to describe the person and the relationship they shared. A semistructured interview, the interviewee's comments were followed by probing questions intended to clarify the meaning of what was being said.

The first set of excerpts is from an interview with Linda, a thirty-three-year-old resident of New Haven, Connecticut. Linda is first asked to describe another person whom she knows well.

INTRV.: I'd like you talk about someone you know well. It can be anybody, a man, a woman anybody. Just keep one person in mind. Okay? What I would like you to do is describe this person to me. Tell me what they are like.

LINDA: Well I know millions of people, but I guess the closest friend to me is my sister. I mean we're close in age. I have a lot of sisters, but I have one particular sister I'm close to. She's stout, extremely kind, and conscientious. I'm not sure what you want. She works, has a husband and two children, lives in a big ranch in Hamden . . .

INTRV.: Okay you said that she's kind and conscientious. What do you mean she's kind?

LINDA: She would do anything that she can to help anyone. She's religious too, but not fanatically religious. She's the kind of person you can call in the middle of the night and she'll . . . If you say that you need her, she'll come. She's always conscious of others' feelings. Like I might blurt something out, but she would stop and think about it first, if it's going to hurt someone she would rephrase it or not say it at all.

INTRV.: You also said she was conscientious. What did you mean by that?

LINDA: She's always conscious of others, of her surroundings. She stops and thinks before she speaks, that's the difference . . . because I blurt things out.

Linda is then asked to explain her sister's character.

INTRV.: Okay. Why do you think . . . you say she's conscientious. Why do you think she is that way?

LINDA: She's always been that way. I guess it's just her nature or whatever. She's always been that way, even as a child.

INTRV.: Okay. You said that you have a tendency to like blurt things out where she has a tendency to think about them.

LINDA: She thinks about it, is it going to . . . how is it going to come out. Before it comes out. I just say it. Then after it's said, if it's not too nice, when it's done then, then I think about, "Oh, I shouldn't have said that, because that hurt Jody's feelings or whatever."

INTRV.: How come she thinks about it first?

LINDA: Well, maybe because she's a couple of years older than I am. Maybe she's just more mature, I don't know.

Finally Linda is asked to characterize her relationship with her sister.

INTRV.: Can you tell me something about how the two of you get along?

LINDA: Oh we get along fine. If I call her and I want to talk to her for three hours, she'll talk, but if she calls me, I would do the same thing. You know, we go a lot of places together. As a matter of fact, we went to Nassau last December. We do a lot of things. We talk about the kids. We talk about our husbands, our houses. We talk about our jobs. We talk about other people. If . . . she's financially better off than I am, so I usually do the needings, but if I need money or something I can always get it, you know, but if I had it she could get it. I don't know. Anything that I need, she's always there with it.

INTRV.: What's the most important thing, do you think, that you do together?

LINDA: I think, well, we discuss our children, if there are any problems with them,

how we can solve them. What we should do about it and if there are other problems. I think that's the most important thing. We have confidence in each other. Which is a very strong kind of bond.

The second interview is with Dick, a thirty-year-old New Yorker about to move to Los Angeles. Dick is also asked to describe someone who is close to him. After initially fighting the interviewer, he finally does offer a characterization of his lover.

INTRV.: What I'd like you to do is describe this person to me. What is this person like?

DICK: She's female. You want a whole bunch of categories now? Does it make a difference to you whether you rate them in terms of what's most important?

INTRV.: Tell me about her.

DICK: She's a female. She's white, twenty-eight years of age, lower-middle-class family, currently a doctor, third year of residency training program. She went to medical school at Yale. I've known her for about three and a half years—lived with her for maybe a year.

INTRV.: Okay. What kind of person is she?

DICK: She's a nice person. Warm.

INTRV.: Can you tell me anything more about her? You said she is nice, warm.

DICK: Well I mean what layer of the onion do you want to be at?

INTRV.: The layer you consider relevant.

DICK: But I am starting at layer one, but then you work your way down. You know someone for three years. You want me to tell you about her secret fears or her unrealized ambitions or her internal torment or her relationship with her family?

INTRV.: Tell me what you think it would be useful for me to know to have a sense of her.

DICK: Well that would take about five or six hours.

INTRV.: Tell me a little bit.

DICK: Well Nancy is kind of an educated woman. She's had four years of medical training and three years of undergraduate and yet she's strikingly uneducated at the same time. She doesn't think very systematically about herself. She is capable of real introspection and great insight, but she has a difficult time generalizing that into the day-to-day world. She's . . . (pause)

INTRV.: She's capable?

DICK: No, she's not very capable of generalizing things.

INTRV.: But she is capable of introspection?

DICK: Yeah, sure, most individuals are. Everybody I know who is not very intro-

spective is practically comatose, okay, or lives in Los Angeles. She's kind of basically bourgeois in her values, materialistic. She finds her salvation, I think, in things. To a lesser extent, in people. She is ambitious, relatively self-sufficient, is beset with a bunch of internal difficulties—her relations with men, I think, generally are a bit difficult for her. Her father was a kind of weak figure in her life and a source of much resentment and hostility and is the kind of ultimate male model, male role model. She has a lot of difficulties in her relationships with men.

INTRV.: Difficulties in what sense?

DICK: She's reticent and self-contained and finds it difficult to be extremely giving of herself. Feels that she's going to be disappointed. A pattern which I may say has some justification. That's about it, I can go on.

Dick goes on to suggest that Nancy is both ambitious and reclusive. He is asked to explain why she is this way.

INTRV.: How do you explain the desire for acclaim on the one hand and the reclusiveness on the other hand?

DICK: Well, there's a lot of different. . . . I mean individuals are little cauldrons of desires and they don't all rationalize in some perfectly coherent sense. It makes them kind of interesting, you know? Show me a linear-oriented personality where every little piece fits together and you come out with a real kind of solid constellation, and I'll guarantee you you'll be bored to death. She's got a lot of conflicting impulses. Her relations with men—on the one hand, she wants them to be strong, but if they're strong, they compromise her independence. And on the other hand, if they're weak, they remind her of her father, who she hates, and there are fundamental tensions there. And there are fundamental tensions in her career path and her kind of life preferences. There no question at all about that, but that's unremarkable.

Dick also claims that Nancy bullies and humiliates others. He is asked to explain this.

INTRV.: Okay a further question. Why is it do you think that Nancy relies on tactics of fear, humiliation rather than tactics of a more positive sort?

DICK: That's a very difficult question. I think some of it is situational. She's in a profession which tends to maintain discipline by the use of those instruments. It's all fear of failure or fear of negative review. . . . and part of it is personality. Over a period of dealing with human beings, she developed certain proclivities towards manipulating them. I mean I hate to sound Machiavellian about the whole thing, but you find that certain people respond in certain ways. Certain things work with them and she's been used to dealing with people in those modes. I mean she's capable of other ways of manipulation too.

Here we have examples of two people who subjectively reconstruct what they observe in very different ways. As a result, each creates a very different kind of understanding of the people and events around them. Linda and Dick are both speaking of people they know very well, and yet it is clear that there are stark differences in the quality as well as the substance of the inferences they make. For Linda, her sister is a collage of the specific, concrete things she does and says. The concrete, fragmented quality of her description of her sister is reflected in her explanations as well. To explain is to find a single specific causal force, internal or external, which is linked to the effect observed. Dick reconstructs Nancy in a very different way. For Dick, Nancy is understood in more general terms. He focuses in part on how it is Nancy thinks, how she makes sense of the world around her. This then provides a framework for interpreting the meaning of the particular activities in which she typically engages. At the same time, Dick considers different aspects of Nancy (her family history, her relationships, her attitudes toward work, etc.) and places them in relation to one another in an attempt to understand the coherence and inherent conflicts of her personality. In sum, Dick and Linda appear to have two very different ways of conceiving of another person, a difference which parallels that between the two Iranians discussed earlier. As a result, Dick and Linda are likely to learn very different things about another person to whom they are exposed and are similarly likely to engage that person in quite different ways.

In this light, it is worth reconsidering the earlier examples of the miners, natives, and students. In the initial presentation, each example was considered as an illustrative case of a failure to learn. Here we may regard them as examples of individual differences in reasoning. In each instance, there is a clear difference between the nature of the understanding of the person serving as teacher and the understanding of the audience. Thus, the Peace Corps worker example may be reconsidered as a case where the structure of worker's reasoning differed from that of the Chad natives. Similarly the Appalachian case can be viewed as an instance where the structure of the political activist's reasoning differed from that of the miners. Finally, the university example may be viewed as a case where the structure of the professor's understanding differed from that of the students. Indeed, the difficulties associated with the learning task in each case can readily be understood in terms of the structural differences between how the task was conceived and thus set by the teacher on one hand and how it was defined by the potential learners on the other.<sup>14</sup>

As with the failure to adapt, this phenomenon of underlying or structural differences in reasoning cannot be comprehended from the perspectives of lib-



eral institutionalism or sociology. Again the problem is that the phenomenon observed contradicts foundational assumptions upon which those perspectives are based. Although their claims about human capacities differ, the two perspectives share the same foundational claim that all people think in basically the same way. Some may be quicker, some more knowledgeable, but all people share the same basic capacity to perceive and make sense of phenomena in their environment. In liberal institutional analysis it is assumed we all share a common rationality, that is, a basic capacity to integrate information and deduce appropriate courses of action in what is loosely referred to as a logical or rational manner. In some more recent theorizing, the assumption of rationality has been weakened and the claim is only of a “bounded rationality.”<sup>15</sup> In either case, however, it is assumed that individuals calculate in order to choose and the nature or structure of this calculation is fundamentally the same for all people. In sociological analyses, it is assumed that our capacity for thought is more limited. Rather than engaging in rational calculation, we are oriented by specific schemas, definitions, and action scenarios that are provided to us by the regularities of daily life we directly experience and the cultural messages or themes to which we are exposed. In this view, the suggestion is that we rely less on reason and more on perception and memory. Even though our capacities are thus diminished in the sociological view, they are still universally shared. Thus both sociological and liberal institutional theories assume all individuals (at least all “normal” individuals) cognize in the same way and have the same basic capacity for learning.

This assumption of common reasoning or cognitive functioning is by no means trivial. It underlies the presumed unidimensional quality of both institutions and culture. It is because both are understood by all in roughly comparable ways that an institution or culture is realized similarly across the host of interactions it is intended to regulate and define. Let us consider one restricted, but exemplary, case: the realization of the institution of marriage in the case of a specific couple. From liberal institutional or sociological perspectives, it is assumed that the institution exists as a set of regulations of behaviors and attitudes that are commonly perceived by the husband and wife. Their specific role requirements may vary, but each understands what is required of himself or herself and by the other partner. In this sense, the institution has a singular realization. It is perceived and responded to by both individuals in the same or a complementary manner. We can therefore speak of *the* marriage, as a singular phenomenon. For the institutionalist, *the* marriage exists as a commonly apprehended set of alternative courses of action, each with its associated rewards

and punishments. For the sociologist, *the* marriage exists more as a set of commonly understood roles and scenarios that determine what should be done and when. In either approach, further analysis regarding the place of the marriage in the larger environment or the consequences of specific changes in practice or belief may then be conducted on this basis.

Problems for this conception of institutions and culture arise when those individuals who are affected do not reason in the same way. The presumed basic singularity or unidimensional quality of social institutions and cultures disintegrates into multiple realizations that may more or less overlap. To illustrate, let us speculate about a marriage between the Iranian couple just described. Clearly the two are likely to understand and operate within the institution of marriage in rather different ways. The man will tend to see marriage in terms of specific conventional prescriptions for how he should behave, what he should believe, and what he should anticipate from his spouse. For the most part, these prescriptions will be conceived in rather concrete and rigidly defined terms. In a similar vein, the man's understanding will also include conventional notions of what the alternative courses of action are in any given situation and of the costs and benefits that are likely to follow from each. What he actually does will be affected accordingly. Given the different quality of her reasoning, the woman is likely to see their marriage quite differently. She may tend to view the institution of marriage as a conventional societal construction. As such, she may regard it to be less a matter of clear value and worthwhile direction and more as an inflexible, potentially oppressive form of social regulation. In this light, she may demand a more open, questioning, and constructive orientation to marriage. This may require that she and her partner determine how they as individuals can best be with one another. This constitutes a very different basic understanding of the condition of marriage and leads to a commensurately different set of standards for judging the value of different action alternatives.

The question then arises, what is the nature of *the* marriage between two people who understand and value the substance of that marriage in qualitatively different terms and therefore orient their action in two very different ways? Clearly such a marriage is complex, a partial integration of distinctive realizations of its cultural meaning and institutional regulation. Cast in these terms, the presumed unidimensional marriage with its relatively coherent meaning and integrated regulations is thus reconceived as a multidimensional collage of somewhat related meanings and sometimes overlapping behavioral imperatives. To comprehend such a marriage, analysis must focus on the interplay between differences in subjective understanding and the qualities of the some-

what common ground of interaction upon which these different subjects meet. These concerns go well beyond what either conventional institutional or sociological analyses are able to address.

### **Implications for Theory and Empirical Research**

Evidence of individual differences in reasoning contradicts the assumptions of liberal institutionalist and sociological theorizing and therefore cannot be understood in these terms. Moreover, this evidence denies a basic tenet of these two standard approaches and therefore constitutes a challenge to the general way in which they represent social life. Evidence of differences in reasoning among the individual members of a society or group suggests that cultural dictates may be perceived, understood, and responded to differently by different people. Similarly it suggests that institutions, as regulators of interaction, will also be conceived and responded to variously. Thus, institutions ranging from marriage to the laws of contract to a popular election might be understood in qualitatively different ways by different people leading to different kinds of response to the same institutional regulation.

The net result is that the integrated and unidimensional conception of the institution in liberal analysis or of the culture or social structure in sociological analysis is exploded. What remains is an array of fragments, a set of coexisting but different layers of meaning and different modes of discourse and interactive engagement. In this context, new theoretical questions must be addressed. What is the nature of the social and psychological dynamic whereby these fragments are constructed, sustained, and transformed? What is the nature of their coherence, even if it is only a “loose” coherence? The latter question may be addressed at several interrelated levels, that of the integration of the collective, that of the integration of the self, and perhaps most fundamentally, that of the relationship between these two loci of integration. These questions define some of the key parameters that must guide the development of new theory.

In addition to theoretical revision, the issue of differences in reasoning demands a reconsideration of research methods. Both institutionalist and sociological empirical work adopt designs that assume that all individuals, including the researcher (at least when they are socialized in the same sociocultural environment), share a common understanding of the specific attitudes, themes, or behaviors being investigated. As a result, data collection can proceed assuming no need to interpret the understandings constructed by the researcher or by the various members of her research population. In this vein, such standard meth-

ods as the experimental design with controls over stimulus presentation and such standard tools as the survey questionnaire make good sense. With the introduction of a claim of qualitative differences in reasoning, the sense of these methods and tools is now subject to doubt. The “objective” or “intersubjective” and therefore shared meaning (and hence implication) of social stimuli and responses can no longer be assumed. Constructed in part by individuals who may reason differently, social actions and events that are ostensibly the same may be differently constituted and directed. Consequently the comparability of meaning, or the lack thereof, must be explored empirically. This requires a research design that not only allows for individual differences, but also actively explores them. This in turn requires open-ended, interpretative techniques that can elicit and probe the subjective meaning of the specific connections that a given individual makes when speaking of or pursuing an action strategy. Only then will the extent and nature of individual differences be apparent. In a self-confirming manner, close-ended, noninterpretative research can only conceal these differences behind the veil of the assumed common meaning of response alternatives.

## CONCLUSION

We have considered several examples of how some people successfully meet the challenges of new social learning and how others do not, even when the requisite information is available and the cost of failing to learn is significant. Our analysis suggests that these cases highlight those aspects of everyday life that contradict the foundations of much contemporary social and political theory. Apart from revealing the inherent limits of current theorizing, our analysis suggests the direction that new theoretical efforts should take. First, such an effort must recognize that there may be fundamental differences between individuals in how they structure their understandings and their action. Similarly there may be differences between societies in how the culture or social order is structured. An attempt must be made to specify the nature of these differences. Second, new theory must avoid sociological or psychological reductionism. Both the individual and society must be viewed as structuring forces that contribute to the definition and dynamic of social life. While interrelated, it is possible and even likely that these two forces will also be at odds with one another. Attention should focus on the consequent uncertainties and tensions that are inherent in everyday life and the role these conditions play in societal and individual development. Finally the relation between social and psychological

structures must be considered in light of the foregoing claims of how structures of each type may vary. On one hand, differently structured cultures and social organizations may set qualitatively different kinds of learning tasks for the individuals to be socialized. The impact of these differences on the development of the affected populations must be considered. On the other hand, different individuals think differently and therefore may be more or less able to learn in the manner demanded by the conditions of their social interaction. The constraints these differences impose on how institutions are realized and how readily social change is accomplished must also be considered.

This theoretical effort must be complemented by appropriately designed empirical research. To begin, this is a matter of adopting the appropriate focus. The theoretical concerns voiced here require an examination of the coherence and differences among structures of individual reasoning and structures of social discourse and interaction. After this has been established, an investigation of the interplay between these interpenetrating psychological and social structures may be conducted. In particular, this would entail an exploration of the social and psychological conditions that facilitate individual development and adaptation on one hand and societal transformation and development on the other. In addition to determining a substantive focus, the theoretical direction suggested here also has implications for research methodology. In particular it demands that systematic observation be supplemented by research designs that facilitate the recognition and interpretation of differences in the underlying structure of action and speech.

The arguments in the remainder of the book are developed with these concerns in mind. In chapter 2, an attempt is made to sketch a theoretical perspective that captures the complex, essentially social psychological dynamic of social life. In the next three chapters, the psychological implications of this vision are developed. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, three modes of thinking are described. In each case, this includes a characterization of the structure of thought that is produced and a depiction of the kinds of understandings and evaluations of social and political life that are constructed. In chapter 6, methodological concerns are addressed. This includes a discussion of general questions regarding appropriate methods as well as a description of the specific instruments and procedures used in the research. In chapter 7, the results of the empirical research are presented. They provide strong support for the theoretical claims regarding differences in individual reasoning. The presentation of results is supplemented by the inclusion of three annotated interviews. They provide examples of the three forms of reasoning discussed in chapters 3

to 5. In the concluding chapter, the implications of this research for social and political analysis are considered. There we return to the larger issues of social psychological theory and the consideration of the interplay between the individual actor and cognition on one hand and social organization and culture on the other.