



# chapter 1



## ■ Sociology as a Way of Seeing

Beyond Either/Or: Seeing Sociologically  
Making Connections: Sociological Dynamics  
Sociological Understanding

## ■ Doing Sociology

Sociology and Science  
Getting beyond "Common Sense"

## ■ Where Did Sociology Come From?

Before Sociology  
The Invention of Sociology  
Classical Sociological Thinkers  
American Sociological Thinkers  
The "Other" Canon

## ■ Contemporary Sociology

Symbolic Interactionism and the Sociology of the Self  
Structural Functionalism and Social Order  
Conflict Theories: An Alternative Paradigm  
Globalization and Multiculturalism: New Lenses, New Issues  
Sociology and Modernism

## ■ Sociology in the 21st Century, Sociology and You

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period.*

— Charles Dickens (1859)

**THESE ARE THE FIRST LINES** of one of Western literature’s greatest novels, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. In it, Dickens recounts the saga of the French Revolution, at once one of the most exciting, hopeful, and momentous events in history, and among its most bloody, cruel, and tragic, a period of unparalleled optimism about the possibilities of human

freedom and some of the most barbaric and repressive measures ever taken in the name of that freedom.

But which is it: best or worst, wisdom or foolishness, light or darkness? Dickens insisted that it was

# What Is Sociology?



both—and there lies the essence of sociological thinking. It’s difficult to hold both ideas in our heads at the same time. More often, we take a position—usually at one extreme or the other—and then try to hold it in the face of evidence that suggests otherwise. We find it easier to take an extreme position than to occupy a vague middle ground of ambivalence.

**Sociology is a way of seeing the world. It takes us beyond the “either/or” framing of common sense, and looks at how most social issues are really “both/and.”**

and social disorder—how it often feels that everything fits together perfectly, like a smoothly functioning machine, and how it often feels as if society is coming apart at the

Besides, logic and common sense insist that it can’t possibly be both.

That’s what makes sociology so fascinating. Sociology is constantly wrestling with two immense and seemingly contradictory questions, social order

seams. If every single individual is simply doing what is best for him- or herself, why is there any social order at all? Why are we not constantly at war with each other? And how is order maintained? How is society possible in the first place?

On the other hand, why does it often seem that society is falling apart? Why do so many people in society disobey its laws, disagree about its values, and differ about the political and social goals of the society? Why is there so much crime and delinquency? Why is there so much inequality? Why does society keep changing?

These sorts of giant questions are what sociology sets out to answer. Sociologists analyze the ways that institutions like family, marketplace, military, and government serve to sustain social order and how problems like inequality, poverty, and racial or gender discrimination make it feel as if it is falling apart. And it turns out that most of the answers aren't so obvious or commonsensical after all.

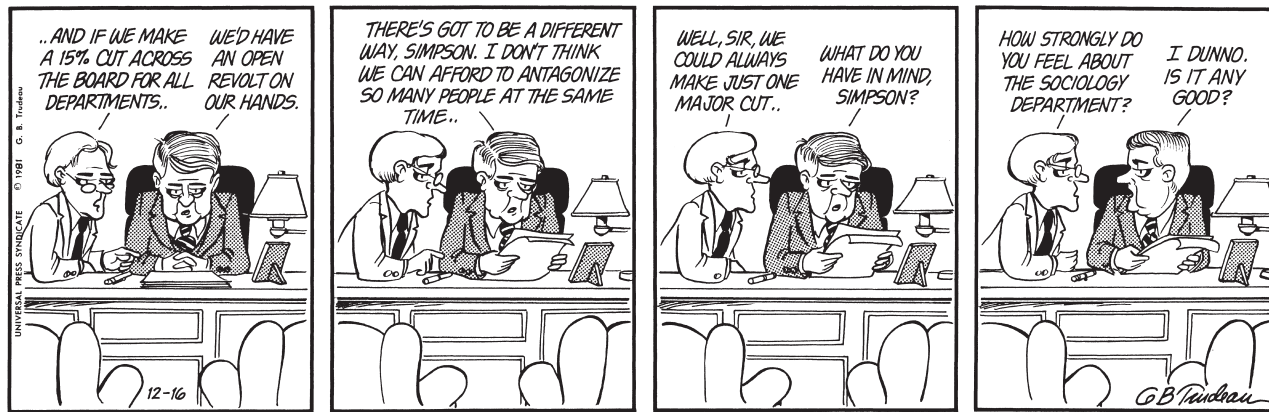
## Sociology as a Way of Seeing

If you're like most people, you know that sociology is "the study of society." But we don't typically know much more than that. What is society? And how do we study it?

Unlike other social sciences, the field of sociology is not immediately evident from just its name, like economics or political science. Nor are there many TV or movie characters who are sociologists, as there are psychologists (like Dr. Phil), psychiatrists (Frasier), or anthropologists (Indiana Jones or Lara Croft). In the popular movie *Animal House* (1979), the protagonist encounters two sorority girls at a party. The writers wanted to portray these girls as gum-chomping, air-headed idiots. So what are they majoring in? Right—sociology.

Sociology sets for itself the task of trying to answer certain basic questions about our lives: the nature of identity, the relationship of the individual to society, our relationships with others. Sociologists try to explain the paradoxes that we daily observe in the world around us: for example, how globalization brings us closer and closer, and, at the same time, seems to drive us further and further apart into smaller religious, tribal, or ethnic enclaves. Or we observe that society is divided into different unequal groups based on class, race, ethnicity, and gender, and yet, at the same time, everyone's values are remarkably similar.

Sociology is both a field of study and a way of seeing. As a field, perhaps the pithiest definition was written 50 years ago, by C. Wright Mills (1959), a professor at Columbia University. Sociology, he wrote, is an "imagination," a way of seeing, a way of "connecting biography to history." What Mills means is that the **sociological imagination** sees our lives as *contextual* lives—our individual identities are sensible only in the social contexts—such as family, or our jobs, or our set of friends—in which we find



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ourselves. A sociological perspective is a perspective that sees connections and contexts. Sociology connects individuals to the worlds in which we live. Stated most simply, *sociology is the study of human behavior in society.*

## Beyond Either/Or: Seeing Sociologically

To help orient you to the field of sociology, read again the quote that begins this chapter. Now, take a look at your local daily newspaper or watch your local TV news. Most of the time, they're telling you how things are getting worse, much worse than they've ever been. Crime waves threaten our safety; dramatic rises in teenage drinking and drug use threaten the survival of the nation; and fundamentalist fanatics make the entire world unsafe. We worry about the spiraling divorce rate, the rate of teen pregnancies, the collapse of marriage. We worry about "new" diseases like SARS, of "old" diseases like smallpox being unleashed as weapons, about costs of prescription medicines, and about the microbial dangers lurking in our food. We fret about the collapse of morality, the decline in religion, the collapse of law and order. We're shocked, outraged, and often frightened when we hear of someone being pushed under a train in a busy New York City subway station. Is the country falling apart?

Perhaps the opposite is true. We're also equally bombarded with stories about the enormous social changes that have made the world a smaller and smaller place, where millions of people can communicate with one another in an instant. Dramatic technological breakthroughs expand the possibilities for trade, cultural exchange, economic development. Scientific advances make it possible to live longer, healthier lives than any people who have ever lived. The mapping of the human genome may enable scientists to eliminate many of the diseases that have plagued human beings for millennia while the rise of the Internet will enable us to communicate that knowledge in a heartbeat. Americans are going to college in greater numbers, and today we have women, African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and gay CEOs, corporate board members, and business owners. Freedom and democracy have spread throughout the world. Is society getting better and better?

To the sociologist, neither of these polar positions is completely true. The sociologist is as concerned about the collapse of traditional social institutions and values as he or she is about the extraordinary ways society is improving. A sociologist is as interested in how things are held together as he or she is in how things are falling apart. Sociologists see *both* sides at once. They don't think in "either/or"; they usually think in "both/and." And what's more, sociologists don't see the glass half full or half



▲ **Half full or half empty? We often think we have to choose, but sociologists see the glass as both half full and half empty—and explore the relationship between the two halves.**

empty, as the classic formulation of optimist or pessimist goes. Sociologists see the glass half full—and want to know about the quality of the air in the glass. They see the glass half empty and want to know about the quality of the water as well.

For example, as you'll see in this book, most sociologists believe our identities come from *both* nature and nurture; that people are getting *both* richer and poorer (it depends on which people in what places); that our racial and ethnic identities *both* draw us closer together and further fragment us.

## Making Connections: Sociological Dynamics

The sociologist is interested in the connections between things getting better and things getting worse. In our globalizing world, where daily the farthest reaches of the world are ever more tightly connected to every other part, where changes in one remote corner of Earth ripple through the rest of society, affecting every other institution—in such a world, the sociologist attempts to see both integration and disintegration and the ways in which the one is related to the other.

Take one example. In New York City, we are occasionally aghast that some innocent person, calmly waiting for a subway train, is pushed in front of an oncoming train and killed—all for apparently no reason at all. On the freeway, we daily hear of cases of “road rage” that got a little out of control.

Instead of merely being content with cutting each other off at more than 70 miles an hour, playing a sort of “freeway chicken” game, or giving each other the finger and cursing at the tops of our lungs, occasionally someone gets really carried away and pulls a gun out of the glove compartment or from the passenger seat and opens fire on a stranger, whose only “crime” might have been to have cut in front of the first driver. Immediately, the headlines blare that society is falling apart, that violence is on the rise. Psychologists offer therapeutic salve and warn of the increasing dangers of urban or suburban life. “It’s a jungle out there,” we’ll say to ourselves. “These people are nuts.”

But sociologists also ask another sort of question: How can so many people drive on clogged freeways, on too-little sleep, inching along for hours, surrounded by maniacs who are gabbing on their cell phones, ignoring speed limits and basic traffic safety—many also going either toward or away from stressful jobs or unbalanced home lives? How can we stuff nearly two million human beings, who neither know one another nor care very much for any of them, into large metal containers, packed like sardines, hurtling through dark tunnels at more than 60 miles an hour? How is it possible that these same people don’t get so murderously angry at their conditions that people aren’t pushed in front of subway trains at every single subway stop every single day of the year? How come more people aren’t driving armed and dangerous, ready to shoot anyone who worsens an already difficult morning commute?

To a sociologist, social *order* is as intriguing as social breakdown. Sociologists want to know what keeps us from fragmenting into 280 million different parts, and, at the same time, we want to know what drives us in so many millions of directions. We want to know what holds us together and what drives us apart. How is social order possible—especially in a nation in which we believe that each individual is completely free to do as he or she sees fit, where we’re all supposed to be “looking out for number 1”? How come, despite all our protests, we also tend to “look out for number 2”?

Is it simply the threat of coercion—that we’d all simply be wreaking murder and mayhem if we weren’t afraid of getting caught? We think it’s something more, and that’s what sociology—and this book—is about.

## Sociological Understanding

Our interest is not entirely in social order, nor is it entirely social disintegration and disorder. Let's return for a moment, to that person who pushed someone in front of a subway train. Sure, that person probably needs to have his or her head examined. But a sociologist might also ask about governmental policies that deinstitutionalized millions of mentally ill people, forcing them onto ever-shrinking welfare rolls and often into dramatically overcrowded prisons. And perhaps we need also to examine the dramatic income disparities that collide in our major cities—disparities that make the United States perhaps the most unequal industrial country in the world and the modern city as the world's most heterogeneous collection of people from different countries, of different races, speaking different languages in the entire world.

And what about that person who opened fire on a passing motorist? Can we discuss this frightening event without also discussing the availability of guns in America and the paucity of effective gun control laws? Shouldn't we also discuss suburban and urban sprawl, the sorry state of our roads and highways, overwork, the number and size of cars traveling on roads built for one-tenth that many? Or maybe it's just those shock jocks that everyone is listening to in their cars—the guys who keep telling us not to just get mad but to get even?

A comparison with other countries is usually helpful. No other industrial country has this sort of road rage deaths; they are far more common in countries ruled by warlords, in which a motorist might unknowingly drive on "their" piece of the highway. And though many other industrial nations have intricate and elaborate subway systems, people being pushed in front of trains is exceedingly rare. And are those same countries far more homogeneous than the United States with well-financed institutions for the mentally ill or with a more balanced income structure? Or maybe it's that people who live in those countries are just more content with their lives than we are.

These are just two examples of how a sociologist looks at both social order and social breakdown. There are many others that we will discuss in this book. For example, the much-lamented decline in marriage and increase in divorce is accompanied by a dramatic increase in people who want to marry and start families (like lesbians, gay men, and transgendered people) and the dramatically high percentage of people who remarry within three years of divorce—which indicates that most people still believe in the institution. The oft-criticized decline in literacy and numeracy among American teenagers is accompanied by equally astonishing increases in competition at America's most elite schools—so much so that many who attended elite schools in the past would not be admitted now.



▲ Order and chaos: Cars proceed in an orderly way on this freeway in Manila, Philippines, despite the "creative" lanes the drivers have developed.

## Doing Sociology

Sure, sociology is an academic field, with a clear object of study and theories that inform that inquiry and various methods that we use to understand it. But just as important, sociology is a kind of posture, a perspective, a way of seeing the world.

Take a look at the course offerings in your school's catalog. Most courses in most fields seem to present part of the field's object of study—except sociology. While about half of our course offerings are about what sociology *is* and *does*—that is, about sociological theory, methods, and specific areas of study—the other half are often listed as what we might call the “sociology ofs”—they offer a sociological perspective on other fields. So we have sociology of alcohol, art, crime, culture, delinquency, drugs, gender, literature, mass communications, media, music, science, sexuality, technology, and work.

Sociology is, of course, also a defined subject—and as such it uses theoretical models of how the world works and various methods to understand that world. But sociology is equally a “way of seeing”—a way of organizing all these seemingly contradictory trends—indeed a way of looking at the objects of study of all the other disciplines.

The sociological perspective itself is dynamic. It is a difficult position to maintain in the wake of moral certainties asserted from both sides. But it is precisely the fact that such moral certainties are asserted from both sides that makes the mapping of relationships—seeing vices as well as virtues, stability as well as change, order as well as disintegration—that much more imperative. Sociologists see both trends simultaneously, as well as seeing how they are interrelated.

The sociological perspective is not avoidance, nor is it an unwillingness to take a position. In fact, sociologists are involved in designing policies to ameliorate many of the world's most pressing problems. Nor is it the same thing as moral relativism, which is a form of apolitical resignation. Most sociologists have strong political commitments to using their research to make other people's lives better, though they inevitably disagree about what “better” might mean and how best to accomplish it. Finally, the sociological perspective is not to be confused with indifference. Seeing problems as analytically complex doesn't mean that one is uninterested in solving them.

To be a sociologist is to recognize the social complexity of problems—the events we seek to understand have many parts, each connected to the others. It requires that we step back from the immediate pulls of political positions and take into account larger contexts in which problems take shape. And it requires a certain intellectual humility, to acknowledge that none of us can completely grasp the fullness of any problem because the parts are so connected. None of us can see the complete picture.

You probably recall the famous story of the blind men asked to describe an elephant. (The story originated in India, but there are also versions of this folktale in ancient China, twelfth-century Islam, and nineteenth-century England, which gives you the idea that it's a parable that strikes a cross-cultural nerve.) In the story, each man touches a different part of the elephant, and then each, in his arrogance, describes the entire animal. One declares the elephant to be a tree (he felt the leg), another a wall (the side), and others declare it a spear (the tusk), a snake (the trunk), and so forth. The sociologist realizes that his or her view is partial, and we rely on the perceptions and observations (research) of other social scientists to complete our understanding of the whole picture.

## Sociology and Science

Sociology is a social science. To some, this phrase is an oxymoron—a phrase where the terms are opposites, sort of like “jumbo shrimp.” It's true that the social sciences cannot match the predictive power of natural science

**Thinner and fatter: Only by understanding the global sociology of race, class, and gender can we explain the patterns of body image, ultra-thinness and obesity. ▼**



because people don't behave as predictably as rocks or bacteria or planets. But that doesn't mean that we cannot test hypotheses to discern patterns of behaviors, clusters of attitudes, and structures and institutions that make social life possible.

Some sociologists would not look out of place in a science department: They create hypotheses based on empirical observations of social phenomena, then test them. In other words, they are looking for scientific facts. Other sociologists would not look out of place in a humanities department: They ask open-ended questions to find out what it feels like to belong to a certain social group. In other words, they are looking for the human spirit.

One sort of sociologist believes that social phenomena like race, class, deviance, and injustice are as real as natural phenomena and should be studied just as objectively. The other sort believes that social phenomena exist only through human interaction, so they can't be studied objectively at all. One uses numbers (quantitative methods), and the other uses words (qualitative methods). They have different theories. They publish in different journals. Sometimes departments are split into two camps, each accusing the other of not doing "real sociology."

However, a sociologist who sits down to compare research methods with a chemist or even biologist will find substantial differences. Other scientists work with objects (carbon isotopes, microorganisms) that have no volition, no motivation, no emotion. When the object of study is intelligent and aware, you need different techniques and different propositions. For this reason, sociology is a *social science*.

On the other end of the conference table, the sociologist talking to the humanities scholar will also find substantial differences. Humanities scholars look at texts (books, movies, art, music, philosophical treatises) for their own sake. The artists may have described the society they lived in, but the description is always an artistic vision, not meant to be taken as real life. Sociologists try to get at the real life. They engage in systematic observation and hypothesis testing, draw a representative sample. They worry about validity and reliability. And they claim that their research has revealed something about what it was really like to live in a past society (or in a contemporary society). For this reason, sociology is a *social science*.

Some of the questions that sociology poses for itself also distinguish it from the other social sciences. For example, economists follow the processes of individuals who act rationally in markets, such as the labor market. Sociologists are interested in such rational economic calculation but also study behavior that is not rational and that is collective—that is, sociologists typically understand that behavior cannot be reduced to the simple addition of all the rational individuals acting in concert. Psychologists may focus on those group processes—there are branches of psychology and sociology that are both called "social psychology"—but our everyday understandings of psychology are that the problems we observe in our lives can be remedied by adequate therapeutic intervention. Sociologists think these "private troubles" actually more often require social solutions. For example, your individual income may be enhanced by working harder, changing your job, or winning the lottery, but the social problem of poverty will never be solved like that—even if every person worked harder, switched jobs, or won the lottery.



*"I'm a social scientist, Michael. That means I can't explain electricity or anything like that, but if you ever want to know about people I'm your man."*

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## Getting beyond “Common Sense”

However, sociology is not just “common sense”—the other rhetorical retreat from engagement with complex social issues. In fact, very often what we observe to be true turns out, after sociological examination, not to be true. Commonsense explanations trade in stereotypes—“women are more nurturing”; “men are more aggressive”—that are never true for everyone. What’s more, common sense assumes that such patterns are universal and timeless—that, for example, men and women are from different planets (Mars and Venus) and that we’re programmed somehow to be completely alien creatures. But what if you actually decide you want to be different—that you want to be an aggressive woman or a nurturing man? Can you? Commonsense explanations have no room for variation, and they have no history. And they leave no room for freedom of choice.

You know that old, tired, argument between “nature” and “nurture”? It describes a debate about whether we behave the ways we do because our biology, our “nature,” determines our actions—as they say, because we are “hardwired” to do so—or because our ancestors millions of years ago found it to their evolutionary advantage to behave in such a way to ensure their survival? Or, in contrast, do we do the things we do because we have been taught to do them, socialized virtually from the moment we are born by institutions that are bigger and more powerful than we are?

To the sociologist, the answer is clear but complex. Our behavior does not result from *either* nature *or* nurture; our behavior results from *both* nature *and* nurture. Looking through a sociological lens reveals that it’s not a question of either/or. It’s all about seeing the both/and and investigating how that relationship is playing out. Of course the things we do are the result of millennia of evolutionary adaptation to our environments, and of course we are biologically organized to do some things and not others. But that environment also includes the social environment. We adapt to the demands and needs of the social contexts in which we find ourselves, too. And we frequently override our biological drives to do things that we are *also* biologically programmed to do. Just as we are hardwired to preserve ourselves at all costs, we are also biologically programmed to sacrifice our own lives for the survival of the group or for our offspring.

But to the sociologist, the two sides of the nature–nurture debate share one thing in common: They make the individual person a passive object of larger forces, with no real ability to act for him- or herself and therefore no role in history. According to nature lovers and nurturers, we can’t help doing what we do: We’re either biologically destined or socially programmed to act as we do. “Sorry, it’s in my genes!” is pretty much the same thing as “Sorry, I was socialized to do it!”

Neither of these positions sees the *interaction* of those forces as decisive. That is the domain of sociology.

What makes a more thorough analysis of social life possible and makes the sociological perspective possible is the way we have crafted the lens through which we view social problems and processes. It is a lens that requires that we see events in their contexts and yet remain aware of how we, as individuals, shape both the contexts and the events in which we participate.

A sociological perspective helps you to see how the events and problems that preoccupy us today are timeless; they do not come from nowhere. They have a history. They are the result of the actions of large-scale forces—forces that are familial, communal, regional, national, or global. And they enable you to see the connections between those larger-scale forces and

**Nature and nurture: Sociology explores how we construct our individual identities through the interaction of our biological inheritance with social categories such as race, class, and gender. ▼**





## Sociology and our World

### More Than Just Common Sense

Does sociology merely give a scientific face to what we already know? Actually, it turns out that many of the things we know by common sense are not true at all. It may be that sociology's single most important contribution is to debunk (disprove) those common-sense ideas.

For example, a large majority of Americans believe the following statements to be true:

1. The United States is a meritocracy, in which any individual can rise to the top as long as he or she works hard enough.
2. The poor are poor because of individual factors, such as laziness, lack of thrift, poor money management skills, or lack of effort or talent.
3. Men are from Mars and women are from Venus—that is, there are fundamental, unchanging, biologically based differences between women and men.
4. Most welfare recipients are minorities who live in large cities.
5. People who live together before they get married are less likely to get divorced because they have already had a “trial marriage.”
6. There is very little racial discrimination remaining in the United States, and the racism that remains is because of racist individuals who give everyone else a bad name.
7. Women and men are just about equal now, and so there is no need for feminists to complain all the time.
8. A woman who is beaten up or abused in her relationship has only herself to blame if she stays.
9. Only people who are unstable mentally commit suicide.
10. The person most likely to rape or sexually assault a woman is a stranger on a dark street.

It turns out that every one of these commonsense assumptions is empirically false. (Each one of them is discussed in the chapters of this book.) As a result, very often the task of sociology is not only to understand why these “facts” are untrue. Sociologists also try to understand why we want so much to believe them anyway.

your own experience, your own participation in them. Sociologists understand that this history is not written beforehand; it is changeable, so that you can exert some influence on how it turns out.

That's why Mills's definition of the sociological imagination, the connection between biography and history, is as compelling today as when it was written half a century ago. Sociology connects you, as an individual, to the larger processes of both stability and change that compose history.

## Where Did Sociology Come From?

The questions that animate sociology today—individuals, progress, freedom, inequality, power—were the founding ideas of the field. Sociology emerged in Europe in the early nineteenth century. At that time, European society had just passed through a calamitous period in which the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution had dramatically transformed European society.

### Before Sociology

Even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, philosophers were attempting to understand the relationship of the individual and society. Political revolutions and

intellectual breakthroughs led to this period being called the “Age of Reason” or the “Enlightenment.” Theorists challenged the established social order, like the rule of the monarchy and hereditary aristocracy, and the ideas that justified it, like the “divine right of kings”—that kings ruled because they were ordained by God. British, French, and eventually American social thinkers began to envision a society as a purposeful gathering together of free individuals, not the result of birth and divine mandate. It was during the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the idea of the “individual” took shape, and philosophers came to understand the individual as the foundation of society.

John Locke (1632–1704), for example, believed that society was formed through the rational decisions of free individuals, who join together through a “social contract” to form society. Society permits and even facilitates the free movement of goods, making life easier and more predictable. The purpose of government, Locke argued ([1689] 1988), was to resolve disagreements between individuals, and ensure people’s rights—but that’s all. If the government goes too far, Locke believed, and becomes a sort of omnipotent state, the people have a right to revolution and to institute a new government.

In France, meanwhile, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1788) had a rather different perspective. Rousseau ([1754] 2007) believed that people were basically good and innocent but that private property creates inequality and with it unhappiness and immorality. Rousseau believed that a collective spirit, what he called the “general will,” would replace individual greed and that through social life people could be free—but only if they were equal.

These two themes—Locke’s emphasis on individual liberty and Rousseau’s idea that society enhanced freedom—came together in the work of Thomas Jefferson, when he penned the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the founding document of the United States. That document asserted that all men are equal in rights and that government is the servant, not the master, of human beings. Jefferson fused Rousseau’s vision of a community with Locke’s ideal of individual freedom, limited government, and free exchange of ideas into a document that continues to inspire people the world over.

These ideas—“discovery” of the individual, the relationship of the individual to society, and the regulation of individual freedom by governments—were the critical ideas circulating in Europe on the eve of the nineteenth century. And these were among the fundamental questions addressed by the new field of sociology.

## The Invention of Sociology

The economic and political changes heralded by the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 were in part inspired by the work of those Enlightenment thinkers. Between 1776 and 1838, European society had undergone a dramatic change—politically, economically, and intellectually. The American and French revolutions replaced absolutist monarchs with republics, where power rested not on the divine right of kings and queens but on the consent of the people. The Industrial Revolution reorganized the production and distribution of goods from the quaint system of craft production, in which apprentices learned trades and entered craft guilds, to large-scale factory production in which only the very few owned the factories and many workers had only their ability to work to sell to the highest bidder.

The foundation of society, one’s identity, the nature of politics, and economics changed fundamentally between the collapse of the “old regime” in the late eighteenth century, and the rise of the new “modern” system in the middle of the nineteenth century (Table 1.1).

The chief sociological themes to emerge from these changes included:

1. *The nature of community.* What does it mean to live in a society; what rights and obligations do we have to each other?
2. *The nature of government.* Should power reside in the hands of a monarch who rules by divine right, or in the people, who alone can consent to be governed?
3. *The nature of the economy.* Should only a few people have most of the wealth and most of the people have very little, or should it be more fairly distributed?
4. *The meaning of individualism.* What rights and responsibilities does an individual have toward him- or herself and to others?
5. *The rise of secularism.* How can religious ideas about God and morality be reconciled with scientific beliefs about rationality and economic ideas about the marketplace?
6. *The nature and direction of change.* Where are we heading? Is it, as Dickens said, writing about this very time, the best of times or the worst of times?

This dramatic change in American and European society—the Industrial Revolution, the political revolutions in America in 1776 and France in 1789—changed the way we saw the world. Even the language that we used to describe that world was transformed. It was during this era that the following words were first used with the meaning they have today: *industry, factory, middle class, democracy, class, intellectual, masses, commercialism, bureaucracy, capitalism, socialism, liberal, conservative, nationality, engineer, scientist, journalism, ideology*—and, of course, *sociology* (Hobsbawm, 1962). Politically, some revolutionists thought we should continue those great movements; conservatives thought we’d gone too far, and it was time to retreat to more familiar social landscapes.

Sociologists both praised and criticized these new developments.

## Classical Sociological Thinkers

The word *sociology* itself was introduced in 1838 by a French theorist, Auguste Comte. To him, it meant “the scientific study of society.” Most of the earliest sociologists embraced a notion of progress—that society passed through various stages from less developed to more developed and that this progress was positive, both materially and morally. This notion of progress is central to the larger intellectual project of “modernism” of which sociology was a part. *Modernism*—the belief in evolutionary progress, through the application of science—challenged tradition, religion, and aristocracies as remnants of the past and saw industry, democracy, and science as the wave of the future.

**Auguste Comte.** Comte (1798–1857) believed that each society passed through three stages of development based on the form of knowledge that provided its foundation: religious, metaphysical, and scientific. In the religious or theological stage, supernatural forces are understood to control the world. In the metaphysical stage, abstract

**TABLE 1.1**

Contrasting the “Old Regime” and the New Social Order		
	OLD REGIME	NEW ORDER
Basis of economy	Land	Property
Location of economic activity	Rural manors	Urban factories
Source of identity	Kinship	Work
	Status/caste	Class
Ideology	Religion	Science
Type of government	Monarchy	Republic
Basis of government	Divine right	Popular consent



▲ Auguste Comte coined the term *sociology* as the scientific study of society.

forces and what Comte called “destiny” or “fate” are perceived to be the prime movers of history. Religious and metaphysical knowledge thus rely on superstition and speculation, not science. In the scientific, or “positive,” stage (the origin of the word *positivism*) events are explained through the scientific method of observation, experimentation, and analytic comparison.

Comte believed that, like the physical sciences, which explain physical facts, sociology must rely on science to explain social facts. Comte saw two basic facts to be explained: “statics,” the study of order, persistence, and organization; and “dynamics,” the study of the processes of social change. Comte believed that sociology would become “the queen of the sciences,” shedding light on earlier sciences and synthesizing all previous knowledge about the natural world with a science of the social world. Sociology, he believed, would reveal the principles and laws that affected the functioning of all societies. Comte hoped that the scientific study of society would enable sociologists to guide society toward peace, order, and reform.

Comte’s preoccupation with sociology as a science did not lead him to shy away from moral concerns; indeed, Comte believed that a concern for moral progress should be the central focus of all human sciences. Sociology’s task was to help society become better. In fact, sociology was a sort of “secular religion,” a religion of humanity, Comte argued. And he, himself, was its highest minister. Toward the end of his life, he fancied himself a secular prophet and signed his letters “the Founder of Universal Religion, Great Priest of Humanity.” (Some sociologists today also suffer from a similar lack of humility!)

After Comte, the classical era of sociological thought began. Sociologists have never abandoned his questions: The questions of order and disorder, persistence and change, remain foundations of contemporary and classical sociological thought.

**Alexis de Tocqueville.** Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), a French social theorist and historian, is known for studies of American democracy and the French Revolution. Tocqueville saw the United States as the embodiment of democracy. Without a feudal past that tied us to outdated ideas of monarchy, or aristocracy and with nearly limitless land on which the country could grow prosperous, democracy flourished. But democracy contains tensions and creates anxieties that European societies did not face.

Tocqueville’s greatest insight is that democracy can either enhance or erode individual liberty. On the one hand, democracy promises increasing equality of conditions and increasingly uniform standards of living. On the other hand, it also concentrates power at the top and weakens traditional sources of liberty, like religion or the aristocracy (which he believed were strong enough to protect individuals from encroachments by the state). Democracies can lead to mass society, in which individuals feel powerless and are easily manipulated by the media. As a result, democratic societies are faced with two possible outcomes, free institutions or despotism. When he tried to predict the direction America was heading, he thought it depended on Americans’ ability to prevent the concentration of wealth and power and on the free spirit of individuals. And the solution, he believed, lay in “intermediate institutions”—the way that Americans, as a nation of “joiners,” developed small civic groups for every conceivable issue or project.

**Karl Marx.** Karl Marx (1818–1883) was the most important of all socialist thinkers. He was also a sociologist and economist who supported himself

## Did you know?

Tocqueville’s most famous book, *Democracy in America* (1835), is perhaps the most famous analysis of American society ever written. But it actually happened by accident. Tocqueville came to the United States to study a major innovation in the American penal system that he regarded as especially enlightened. The reform? Solitary confinement, which was initially a reform that would give the otherwise “good” person a chance to reflect on his actions and begin to reform himself.

by journalism but lived the life of an independent intellectual and revolutionary. Marx's greatest sociological insight was that class was the organizing principle of social life; all other divisions would eventually become class divisions.

Marx's great intellectual and political breakthrough came in 1848 (Marx and Engels, [1848] 2002). Before that, he had urged philosophers to get their heads out of the clouds and return to the real world—that is, he urged them towards “materialism,” a focus on the way people organize their society to solve basic “material” needs such as food, shelter, and clothing as the basis for philosophy, not “idealism,” with its focus on society as the manifestation of either sacred or secular ideas. As revolutions were erupting all across Europe, he saw his chance to make that philosophy into a political movement. With Engels, he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. Asserting that all history had “hitherto been the history of class struggles,” the *Manifesto* linked the victory of the proletariat (the working class) to the development of capitalism itself, which dissolved traditional bonds, like family and community, and replaced them with the naked ties of self-interest.

Initially, Marx believed, capitalism was a revolutionary system itself, destroying all the older, more traditional forms of social life and replacing them with what he called “the cash nexus”—one's position depended only on wealth, property, and class. But eventually, capitalism suppresses all humanity, drowning it in “the icy waters of egotistical calculation.” We are not born greedy or materialistic; we become so under capitalism.

His central work was *Capital* (Marx, [1867] 1998), a three-volume work that laid out a theory of how capitalism worked as a system. His central insight was that the exchange of money and services between capital (those who own the means of production) and labor (those who sell their “labor power” to capitalists for wages) is unequal. Workers must work longer than necessary to pay for the costs of their upkeep, producing what Marx called “surplus value.” And because of competition, capitalists must try to increase the rate of surplus value. They do this by replacing human labor with machines, lowering wages (and cutting any benefits) until workers can't afford even to consume the very products they are producing, and by centralizing their production until the system reaches a crisis. Thus capitalists are not only fighting against labor, but they are also competing against each other. Eventually, Marx believed, it would all come tumbling down.

This work inspired socialists all over the world who saw the growing gap between rich and poor as both a cause for despair about the conditions of the poor and an occasion for political organizing. Marx believed that the “laws of motion” of capitalism would bring about its own destruction as the rich got so rich and the poor got so poor that they would revolt against the obvious inequity of the system. Then workers would rise up and overthrow the unequal capitalist system and institute communism—the collective ownership of all property.

Marx believed this would take place first in the industrial countries like Britain and Germany, but the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century that used Marx as inspiration were in largely peasant societies, like Russia and China, for example. Nowhere in the world has Marx's political vision been implemented. His economic theory that the development of capitalism tends to concentrate wealth and power, however, has never been more true than today, when the gap between rich and poor is greater than ever in U.S. history. Currently, the richest 1 percent of people in the world receive as much income as the bottom 5 percent. Globally, the United States has the most unequal distribution of income of all high-income nations (UC Atlas of Global Inequality, 2007).

## Did you know?

To earn enough money to write his books, Marx also served as a journalist. His coverage of the American Civil War, which he saw as a clash between the feudal South and the capitalist North, was published all over Europe.

**Karl Marx argued that, as capitalism progressed, the rich would get richer and the poor would get poorer—until it exploded in revolution. ▼**



# How do we know what we know?



## Suicide Is *Not* an Individual Act

On the surface, there is no act more personal or individual

than suicide. Taking your own life is almost always explained by individual psychopathology because a person must be crazy to kill him- or herself. If that's true, Durkheim reasoned, suicide would be distributed randomly among the population; there would be no variation by age, religion, region, or marital status, for example.

Yet that is exactly what he found; suicide varies by:

1. **Religion.** Protestants commit suicide far more often than Catholics, and both commit suicide more often than Jews (he did not measure Muslims).
2. **Age.** Young people and old people commit suicide more often than middle-aged people.
3. **Marital status.** Single people commit suicide more often than married people.
4. **Gender.** Men commit suicide more often than women.
5. **Employment.** Unemployed people commit suicide more often than the employed.

Because we can assume that unemployed, unmarried young male Protestants are probably no more likely to be mentally ill than any other group, Durkheim asked what each of these statuses might contribute to keeping a person from suicide. And he determined that the “function” of each status is to embed a person in a community, to provide a sense of belonging, of “integrating” the person into society.

What's more, these statuses also provided rules to live by, solid norms that constrain us from spinning wildly out of control, that “regulate” us. The higher the level of integration and regulation, Durkheim reasoned, the lower the level of suicide. Too little integration leads to what Durkheim called “egoistic” suicide, in which the individual kills him- or herself because he or she doesn't feel the connection to the group. Too little regulation led to what Durkheim called “anomic” suicide, in which the person floats in a sense of normlessness and doesn't know the rules that govern social life or when those rules change dramatically.

But sometimes there can be too much integration, where the individual

completely loses him- or herself in the group and therefore would be willing to kill him- or herself to benefit the group. A suicide that resulted from too much integration is one Durkheim called “altruistic”—think of suicide bombers, for example. And sometimes people feel overregulated, trapped by rules that are not of their own making, that lead to what Durkheim called “fatalistic” suicide. Durkheim saw this type of suicide among slaves, for example, or, as he also hypothesized, “very young husbands.” Why do you think he thought that?

### Types of Suicide and Integration and Regulation

	Too little	Too much
Level of integration	Egoistic	Altruistic
Level of regulation	Anomic	Fatalistic

Durkheim's methodological innovation was to find a way to measure something as elusive as integration or regulation—the glue that holds society together and connects us to each other. Ironically, he found the way to “see” integration and regulation at those moments it wasn't there!

**Emile Durkheim.** Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a master of sociological inquiry. He searched for distinctly social origins of even the most individual and personal of issues. His greatest work, *Suicide* (1897), is a classic example of his sociological imagination. On the surface, suicide appears to be the ultimate individual act. Yet Durkheim argued that suicide is profoundly social, an illustration of how connected an individual feels to others. Durkheim tried to measure the amount of integration (how connected we feel to social life) and regulation (the amount that our individual freedoms are constrained) by empirically examining what happens when those processes fail.

In a sense, Durkheim turned the tables on economists who made a simple linear case that freedom was an unmitigated good and that the more you have the happier you will be. Durkheim argued that too much freedom might reduce the ties that one feels to society and therefore make one *more* likely to commit suicide, not less!

Durkheim's study of suicide illustrated his central insight: that society is held together by "solidarity," moral bonds that connect us to the social collectivity. "Every society is a moral society," he wrote. Social order, he claimed, cannot be accounted for by the pursuit of individual self-interest; solidarity is emotional, moral, and nonrational. Rousseau had called this "the general will," Comte called it "consensus," but neither had attempted to actually study it (see also Durkheim, [1893] 1997).

In traditional society, solidarity is relatively obvious: Life is uniform and people are similar; they share a common culture and sense of morality that Durkheim characterizes as **mechanical solidarity**. In modern society, with its division of labor and diverse and conflicting interests, common values are present but less obvious. People are interdependent, and Durkheim calls this **organic solidarity**.

Durkheim's influence has been immense, not only in sociology, where he ranks with Marx and Weber as one of the founders of the discipline, but also in anthropology, social psychology, and history. Durkheim's use of statistics was pioneering for his time, and his concept of the "social fact," his rigorous comparative method, and his functional style of analysis have been widely adopted (Durkheim, [1895] 1997). His emphasis on society as a moral entity has served as a powerful critique of abstract individualism and rationality and of a definition of freedom that places human liberty in opposition to society.

**Max Weber.** Max Weber (1864–1920) was an encyclopedic scholar whose expertise left hardly a field untouched. But his chief interest in all his studies was the extraordinary importance of "rationality" in the modern world. His major insights were that rationality was the foundation of modern society and that while rationality organized society in more formal, legal, and predictable ways, it also trapped us in an "iron cage" of bureaucracy and meaninglessness.

To understand society, Weber developed a sociology that was both "interpretive" and "value free." Weber's interpretive sociology understands social relationships by showing the sense they make to those who are involved in them. Weber also insisted that experts separate their personal evaluations from their scientific pronouncements because such value judgments cannot be logically deduced from facts. By protecting science from the taint of ideology, Weber hoped also to protect political debate from unwarranted claims by experts. "Value freedom" does not mean sociologists should not take political positions but that we must use value judgments to select subjects deemed worthy of research and must engage with the minds and feelings of the people being studied.

Weber's most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904, 1905), was a study of the relationship of religious ideas to economic activity. What made European capitalism unique, he argued, was its connection to the ideas embodied in the Protestant Reformation, ideas that enabled individuals to act in this world. Essentially, Weber argued that the Puritan ethic of predestination led to a deep-seated need for clues about whether one is saved or not. Seeking some indication, Protestants, particularly Calvinists, began to value material success and worldly profit as signs of God's favor.

At the end, however, Weber was pessimistic. Rationality can free us from the theocratic past but also imprison us in an "iron cage"—an utterly dehumanized and mechanized world. Like Marx, Weber believed that the modern capitalist order brought out the worst in us: "In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped

## Did you know?

Weber began the work on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* when he was invited to give a lecture at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1900. He stopped off in Philadelphia to read some of Benjamin Franklin's papers and believed he had discovered the kernel of the spirit of capitalism. All his major works appeared after he returned from that trip.

**Max Weber introduced purely social processes, like charisma and status, as sources of identity and inequality. ▼**





of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.”

And, like Marx, Weber believed that, in the long run, class was the most significant division among people. But Weber had a more complicated understanding. At any one moment, he wrote, there are other, less economic, factors that divide people from each other, as well as unite them into groups. To class, Weber added the idea of “status” and “party.” “Party” referred to voluntary organizations that people would enter together to make their voices heard collectively because individually we would be unable to affect real change.

While one’s class position was objective, based on the position in the labor market, status groups were based, Weber believed, on social factors—what other people thought about one’s lifestyle. Class is based on one’s relationship to production; status is based on one’s relationship to consumption. While people really couldn’t do much about class, they can definitely try to transform their status because it depends on how others see them. The desire to have others see one as belonging to a higher status group than one actually belongs to leads to extraordinary patterns of consumption—buying very expensive cars and homes to “show off” or “keep up with the Joneses,” for example.

In later writings, Weber argued that the characteristic form of modern organization—whether in the state, the corporation, the military, university, or church—is bureaucratic. Whereas Marx predicted a revolution that would shatter capitalism, and Durkheim foresaw new social movements that would reunify people, Weber saw a bleak future in which individual freedom is increasingly compressed by corporations and the state.

Weber’s often dense and difficult prose was matched by the enormous range of his writings and the extraordinary depth of his analysis. He remains the most deft thinker of the first generation of classical theorists, both appreciating the distinctiveness of Western society’s promotion of individual freedom and deploring its excesses, celebrating rational society, and fearing the “iron cage” of an overly rational world.

**Georg Simmel.** Georg Simmel (1858–1918) is among the most original and far-ranging members of the founding generation of modern sociology. Never happy within the academic division of labor, he contributed to all of the social sciences but remained primarily a philosopher.

Simmel was on a quest for a subject matter for sociology that would distinguish it from the other social sciences and the humanistic disciplines. He found this not in a new set of topics but in a method, or rather, in a special point of view. The special task of sociology is to study the *forms* of social interaction apart from their content. Simmel assumes that the same social forms—competition, exchange, secrecy, domination—could contain quite different content, and the same social content could be embodied in different forms. It mattered less to Simmel what a person was competing about, or whether domination was based on sheer force, monetary power, or some other basis: What mattered to him was the ways that these forms of domination or competition had specific, distinctive properties.

Forms arise as people interact with one another for the sake of certain purposes or to satisfy certain needs. They are the processes by which individuals combine into groups, institutions, nations, or societies. Forms may gain autonomy from the demands of the moment, becoming larger, more solid structures that stand detached from, even opposed to, the continuity of life. Some forms may be historical, like “forms of development”—stages that societies might pass through. Unlike Marx, Durkheim, or Weber, then, Simmel never integrated his work into an overarching scheme. Instead he gathered a rich variety of contents under each abstract form, allowing for new and startling comparisons among social phenomena.

While this all sounds somewhat “formal” and abstract, Simmel’s major concern was really about individualism. His work is always animated by the question of what

the social conditions are that make it easier for persons to discover and express their individuality. In modern society, with its many cultural and social groups, individuals are caught in crosscutting interests and expectations. We belong to so many groups, and each demands different things of us. Always aware of the double-edged sword that characterizes sociology, Simmel saw both sides of the issue. For example, in his major philosophical work on money, he argued that money tends to trivialize human relationships, making them more instrumental and calculable, but it also enlarges the possibilities of freedom of expression and expands the possibilities for action. Like a good sociologist, Simmel argued that money is neither the root of all evil nor the means to our emancipation: It's both.

## American Sociological Thinkers

Three American sociologists from the first decades of the twentieth century took the pivotal ideas of European sociology and translated them into a more American version. They have each, since, joined the classical *canon* or officially recognized set of foundational sociologists.

**Thorstein Veblen.** Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) is best known for his biting satirical work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Here, he argued that America was split in two, between the “productive”—those who work—and the “pecuniary”—those who have the money. That is, he divided Americans into workers and owners, respectively. The wealthy, he argued, weren't productive; they lived off the labor of others, like parasites. They spent their time engaged in competitive displays of wealth and prestige, which he called “conspicuous consumption”—consumption that is done because it is visible and because it invites a certain social evaluation of “worth.” One comes to advertise wealth through wasteful consumption.

He also saw a tension between the benevolent forces of technology and the profit system that distorts them. He contrasted the rationality of work, of the machine process and its personnel, to the irrational caprices of speculators, financiers, and the wealthy who squander valuable goods so as to win prestige. Modern society was neither a simple Marxian class struggle between the malevolent wealthy owners and their naïve and innocent workers, nor was technology inevitably leading to either social uplift or social decay. It was not a matter of the technology but of its ownership and control and the uses to which it was put.

**Lester Ward.** Lester Ward (1841–1913) was one of the founders of American sociology and the first to free it from the biological fetters of the Darwinian model of social change. Ward rebelled against **social Darwinism**, which saw each succeeding society as improving on the one before it. Instead, Ward stressed the need for social planning and reform, for a “sociocratic” society that later generations were to call a welfare state. His greatest theoretical achievement, called the theory of “social telesis,” was to refute social Darwinism, which held that those who ruled deserved to do so because they had “adapted” best to social conditions (Ward, [1883] 1970).

Ward argued that, unlike Darwinist predictions, natural evolution proceeded in an aimless manner, based on adaptive reactions to accidents of nature. In nature, evolution was more random, chaotic, and haphazard than social Darwinists imagined. But in society, evolution was informed by purposeful action, which he called “social telesis.”

Ward welcomed the many popular reform movements because he saw enlightened government as the key to social evolution. Education would enable the common man and woman to participate as democratic citizens. The bottom layers of



▲ Mary Wollstonecraft wrote novels, treatises, a travelogue, a history of the French Revolution, a conduct guide, and a children's book, but is best known for her sociological treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in which she argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education.

society, the proletariat, women, even the underclass of the slums, are by nature the equals of the “aristocracy of brains,” he wrote. They lack only proper instruction.

**George Herbert Mead.** George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) studied the development of individual identity through social processes. He argued that identity is the product of our interactions with ourselves and with others, which is based on the distinctly human capacity for self-reflection. He distinguished between the “I,” the part of us that is inherent and biological, from the “me,” the part of us that is self-conscious and created by observing ourselves in interaction. The “me” is created, he said, by managing the **generalized other**, by which he meant a person's notion of the common values, norms, and expectations of other people in a society. Thus Mead developed a distinctly *social* theory of the self (the “me”)—one that doesn't bubble up from one's biology alone but a self that takes shape only through interaction with society (Mead, 1967).

This “pragmatic” approach—in which one examines social phenomena as they occur—actually made Mead optimistic. Mead believed that each of us develops through play, first by making up the rules as we go along, then later by being able to follow formal rules, and still later by learning to “take the role of the other”—to put ourselves in others' shoes. The ability to step outside of ourselves turns out to be the crucial step in developing a “self” that is fully able to interact with others. Mead's work is the foundation for much of the sociological research in interactionism.

## The “Other” Canon

Thus far, you've probably noticed, the classical **canon** of sociology has consisted entirely of White males. And for many years, American sociology listed only these great pioneers as the founders of the field. Others, equally influential in their time, were either ignored or their contributions downplayed. In the 1930s, as sociology was seeking legitimacy as an academic discipline, theorists who had emphasized inequality and diversity were marginalized and excluded from the canon of the field's pioneers, but they first pointed out the ways in which inequality and identity are both derived from race, class, ethnicity, and gender. As a result, to discuss them now is not to capitulate to some form of political correctness; it is instead an effort to return them to their earlier prominence and recognize that at any moment in history—including the present—there are many competing theoretical models.

Two theorists, one British and one American, brought women's position and gender inequality into the center of their writing. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), a passionate advocate of the equality of the sexes, has been called the first major feminist. Many of her ideas, such as equal education for the sexes, the opening of the professions to women, and her critique of marriage as a form of legal prostitution, were shocking to her contemporaries but have proven remarkably visionary. In her classic book, Wollstonecraft argued that society couldn't progress if half its members are kept backward, and she proposed broad educational changes for both boys and girls.

But she also suggested the problems are cultural. Women contribute to their own oppression. Women accept their powerlessness in society because they can use their informal interpersonal sexual power to seduce men, an enterprise that is made easier if they also deceive themselves. Men who value women not as rational beings but as objects of pleasure and amusement allow themselves to be manipulated, and so the prison of self-indulgence

### Did you know?

Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary, married the great British poet Percy Shelley. Mary Shelley was the author of the classic gothic horror novel *Frankenstein*.

corrupts both sexes. Wollstonecraft was the first classical theorist to apply the ideas of the Enlightenment to the position of women—and find the Enlightenment, not women, to be the problem!

Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) was America’s first female foreign correspondent. Her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) became the intellectual foundation of the American women’s movement. The book is a bracing call for complete freedom and equality, a call that “every path be open to woman as freely as to man.” Fuller calls on women to become self-reliant and not expect help from men and introduces the concept of sisterhood—women must help one another, no matter whether they are scholars, servants, or prostitutes. Her research documents women’s capabilities from an immense catalogue of mythology, folklore, the Bible, classical antiquity, fiction, and history. She explores the image of woman, in all its ambiguity, within literature and myth, and asserts “no age was left entirely without a witness of the equality of the sexes in function, duty, and hope.” She also calls for an end to sexual stereotyping and the sexual double standard.

Frederick Douglass (1817–1895) was the most important African American intellectual of the nineteenth century. He lived 20 years as a slave and nearly nine as a fugitive slave and then achieved international fame as an abolitionist, editor, orator, and the author of three autobiographies. These gave a look into the world of oppression, resistance, and subterfuge within which the slaves lived.

Sociologically, Douglass’s work stands as an impassioned testament to the cruelty and illogic of slavery, claiming that *all* human beings were equally capable of being full individuals. His work also reveals much about the psychological world of slaves: its sheer terror but also its complexities. Its portraits of slave owners range from parody to denunciation and, in one case, even respect, and all serve Douglass’s principal theme: that slaveholding, no less than the slave’s own condition, is learned behavior and presumably can be unlearned.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was the most articulate, original, and widely read spokesman for the civil rights of black people for a period of over 30 years. A social scientist, political militant, essayist, and poet, he wrote 19 books and hundreds of articles, edited four periodicals, and was a founder of the NAACP and the Pan-African movement. His work forms a bridge between the nineteenth century and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Today he is recognized as one of the greatest sociologists in our history, and the American Sociological Association recently voted to name the annual award for the most influential book after him.

Du Bois believed that race was the defining feature of American society, that, as he put it, “the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line,” and that, therefore, the most significant contribution he could make toward achieving racial justice would be a series of scientific studies of the Negro. In 1899, he published *The Philadelphia Negro*, the first study ever of Black people in the United States; he planned an ambitious set of volumes that would together finally understand the experiences of the American Negro (Du Bois, [1899] 1999).

Du Bois also explored the psychological effects of racism, a lingering inner conflict. “One feels ever his two-ness—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” His work defines a “moment in history when the American Negro began to reject the idea of the world belonging to white people.” Gradually disillusioned with White people’s resistance to integration, Du Bois eventually called for an increase in power and especially economic autonomy, the building of separate Black businesses and institutions.



▲ Margaret Fuller had been editor of the important Transcendentalist journal, *The Dial*, for two years and was literary critic for Horace Greeley’s famous paper, *The New York Tribune*, when she published *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), a variegated argument for women’s independence and critique of gender inequality in nineteenth-century American society.

W. E. B. Du Bois identified racism as the most pressing social problem in America—and the world. ▼



## Did you know?

W. E. B. Du Bois was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University (1895). It was, at the time, only the fifth Ph.D. ever awarded to an African American in the United States.



▲ **Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that defining women solely by their reproductive role is harmful to women—as well as to men, children, and society.**

Most readers who know Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) at all know her for her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1899) or for her novel *Herland* (1915). But sociologists know her for her groundbreaking *Women and Economics* (1898), a book in which she explores the origin of women’s subordination and its function in evolution. Woman makes a living by marriage, not by the work she does, and so man becomes her economic environment. As a consequence her female qualities dominate her human ones, because it is the female traits through which she earns her living. Women are raised to market their feebleness, their docility, and so on, and these qualities are then called “feminine.”

Gilman was one of the first to see the need for innovations in child rearing and home maintenance that would ease the burdens of working women. She envisaged housework as being like any other kind of work—as a public, social activity no different from shoe-making or shipbuilding. In her fiction she imagines a range of institutions that overcome the isolation of women and children, such as communal kitchens, day care centers, and city plans that foster camaraderie rather than withdrawal. For women, as well as for men, she wrote in her autobiography, “[t]he one predominant duty is to find one’s work and do it.”

One of the important commonalities among these founders of sociological thought was that because they were minorities or women, they were constantly defiled and denounced because of their views. Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft were denounced as “feminists,” their reputations sullied by their personal relationships. Du Bois and Gilman were denounced because each gave such weight to economic independence for Blacks and for women; they were accused of reducing social issues to simple economic autonomy. And Frederick Douglass was consistently denounced because he extended his cry for Black freedom to women as well. It was Douglass who provided the oratorical support for the suffrage plank at the first convention for women’s rights in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848—for which he was denounced the next day as an “Aunt Nancy man,” the nineteenth-century equivalent of a wimp.

Doing sociology is not always comfortable, nor is sociology done only by those whose material lives are already comfortable. Sometimes sociology challenges common sense and the status quo.

## Contemporary Sociology

Contemporary sociologists return constantly to the ideas of its founders for inspiration and guidance as they develop their own questions about how society works—and doesn’t work. Classical theories provide orientation for the development of sociological thinking.

In the United States, sociology developed as an academic field in the period between 1930 and 1960. It promised to be a social science that could explain the historical origins and dynamics of modern society. Two questions dominated the field: What could sociology contribute to the study of the self? And what processes ensure social order? Stated differently, the first question was about the distinction of sociology from psychology: What is the self, and how is it different from what psychologists call “personality”? And the second question was really about why there had been such dramatic political upheavals in Europe (Nazism, Fascism, Communism) and why, despite the terrible ravages of the great Depression and the instability of the world war, the United States remained relatively stable and orderly.

## Symbolic Interactionism and the Sociology of the Self

The creation of a stable social “self” rested on interest in microlevel interactions, interactions among individuals, and sociologists who called themselves “symbolic interactionists.” **Symbolic interactionism** examines how an individual’s interactions with his or her environment—other people, institutions, ideas—help people develop a sense of “self.” The “symbolic” part was the way we use symbol systems—like language, religion, art, or body language and decoration—to navigate the social world. Symbolic interactionists follow in the sociological tradition of George Herbert Mead.

Erving Goffman, an influential symbolic interactionist, used what he called a *dramaturgical* model to understand social interaction. Like an actor preparing to perform a part in a play, a *social* actor practices a part “backstage,” accumulating props and testing out different ways to deliver his or her lines. The actual “frontstage” performance, in front of the intended audience, helps us refine our presentation of self: If the people we want to like us do, in fact, like us, we realize that our performance is successful, and we will continue it. But if they reject us or don’t like us, we might try a different strategy, rehearse that “backstage,” and then try again. If that fails, our identity might get “spoiled,” and we would have to either change the venue of our performance, alter our part significantly, or accept society’s critical reviews.

In one of Goffman’s most important works, he looked at what happens to individuals’ identities when all their props are removed and they are forced to conform to an absolutely rigid regime. In *total institutions* such as prisons, mental hospitals, and concentration camps, Goffman discerned that individuals are routinely stripped of anything that identifies them as individuals. And yet, still, they try to assert something that is theirs alone, something that enables them to hold on to their individual senses of themselves.

In his conclusion to his book *Asylums* (1961), Goffman describes this dynamic. He writes that

... without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks. (Goffman, 1961, p. 320)

The British say the king (or queen) “reigns but does not rule.” To the sociologist, the monarchy symbolically represents the nation, providing a sense of unity and shared purpose. ▼

## Structural Functionalism and Social Order

At the larger, structural, or “macro” level, sociologists were preoccupied with political and social stability and order. Following Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), sociologists explored what they called **structural functionalism**, a theory that social life consisted of several distinct integrated levels that enable the world—and individuals who are within it—to find stability, order, and meaning. Functionalism offers a **paradigm**, a coherent model of how society works and how individuals are socialized into their roles within it (Parsons, 1937, 1951).

Parsons believed that like most natural phenomena, societies tend toward



balance—balance within all their component parts and balance within each individual member of society. The functionalist model stresses balance and equilibrium among the values of the society, its norms, and the various institutions that develop to express and sustain those values over time.

According to this perspective, every institution, every interaction has a “function”—the reproduction of social life. Thus, for example, educational institutions function to ensure the steady transmission of social values to the young and to filter their entry into the labor force until the labor force can accommodate them. (If every 18-year-old simply went off to work, more than half wouldn’t find jobs!) Families “function” to regulate sexual relationships and to ensure the socialization of the young into society.

It was left to Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), Parsons’s former student and colleague, to clarify functionalism and also extend its analysis. Like Parsons, he argued that society tends toward equilibrium and balance. Those processes, events, and institutions that facilitate equilibrium he called “functional,” and those that undermine it he called “dysfunctional.” In this way, Merton understood both the forces that maintain social order and those that do not (Merton, [1949] 1976).

Merton argued that the functions of any institution or interaction can be either “manifest” or “latent.” **Manifest functions** are overt and obvious, the intended functions, while **latent functions** are hidden and unintended but nonetheless important. For example, the manifest function of going to college used to be that a person educated in the liberal arts would be a better, more productive citizen. The latent function was that going to college would also enable the graduate to get a better job. However, that’s changed significantly, and the manifest function for most college students today is that a college education is a prerequisite for getting a good job. Latent functions today might include escape from parental control or access



Log on to  
www.MySocLab.com to participate  
in these polls and view your class’s  
responses.

What  
do **you**  
think?



### How Religious Are People?

How do we measure religiosity? One way is through self-reports of feelings. Another is through behavior, such as church attendance or frequency of prayer. Religion is a major social institution and an important agent of socialization. Our religious group membership teaches us how often we should pray. Protestants, for example, report praying more frequently than Americans of other religions. Other statuses and roles we occupy, such as gender, have expectations for behavior surrounding religion as well. So, what do you think?

#### About how often do you pray?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Several times a day<br><input type="radio"/> Once a day<br><input type="radio"/> Several times a week | <input type="radio"/> Once a week<br><input type="radio"/> Less than once a week<br><input type="radio"/> Never |
|---|---|

See the end of the chapter to compare your answers to national survey data.

Source: General Social Survey, 2004.

to a new set of potential dating partners, because many people meet their future spouses in college.

As they cast their eye back to classical theorists, functionalists followed Durkheim's idea that society was held together by shared beliefs. More than that, they believed that every social institution helped to integrate individuals into social life. What *was*, they argued, "was" for a reason—it worked. When there was a problem, such as, for example, juvenile delinquency, it was not because delinquents were bad people but because the system was not socializing young boys adequately. Poverty was not the result of the moral failings of the poor but a systemic incapacity to adequately provide jobs and welfare to all. Although functionalism was criticized for its implicit conservatism—if it exists it serves a purpose and shouldn't be changed—the theory also expressed a liberal faith in the ability of American institutions to eventually respond to social problems.

Functionalism was, itself, "functional" in explaining society during a period of stability and conformity like the 1950s. But by the end of the decade there were rumblings of change—from individuals and groups who came to believe that what functioned for some groups wasn't so functional for other groups. They pushed sociologists to see the world differently.

## Conflict Theories: An Alternative Paradigm

In the 1960s, many sociologists, inspired more by Marx and Weber than by Durkheim and Parsons, argued that this celebrated ability of American institutions to respond to social problems was itself the problem. American institutions did not solve problems; they caused them by allocating resources unequally. The United States was a society based on structural inequality, on the unequal distribution of rewards. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer—and the institutions of the economy, the political process, and social reforms often perpetuated that inequality.

Generally, these sociologists adopted a theoretical paradigm that was called **conflict theory**—a theory that suggested that the dynamics of society, both of social order and social resistance, were the result of the conflict among different groups. Like Marx and Weber before them, conflict theorists believed that those who had power sought to maintain it; those who did not have power sought to change the system to get it. The constant struggles between the haves and the have-nots was the organizing principle of society, and the dynamic tension between these groups gave society its motion and its coherence. Conflict theories included those that stressed gender inequality (feminist theory), racial inequality (critical race theory), or class-based inequality (Marxist theory or socialist theory).

For two decades, the 1970s and 1980s, these two theories, functionalism and conflict theory, were themselves in conflict as the dominant theoretical perspectives in sociology. Were you to pick up an introductory sociology textbook originally written in the last two decades of the twentieth century, between 1980 and 2000, it would likely describe these

**Conflict theorists argue that society is held together by the tensions of inequality and conflict. Rich and poor, powerful and powerless, struggle for resources and goods. In 2004, a Sudanese policeman controls access to the distribution of food and clothing to hungry refugees in Darfur. ▼**





two theoretical perspectives (as well as symbolic interactionism to describe microlevel social interactions) as the dominant and competing perspectives of the field (Table 1.2).

Today the dramatic global economic and political shifts of the past decades, the rise of new transnational institutions like the EU and trade agreements like NAFTA, and the rise of new social movements based on ethnicity or religion to challenge them require that sociologists shift the lenses through which they view the social world.

## Globalization and Multiculturalism: New Lenses, New Issues

The events of the past few decades have seen these older divisions among sociologists subsiding and the incorporation of new lenses through which to view sociological issues. Probably the best terms to describe these new lenses are globalization and multiculturalism. By **globalization**, we mean that the interconnections—economic, political, cultural, social—among different groups of people all over the world, the dynamic webs that connect us to one another and the ways these connections also create cleavages among different groups of people. By **multiculturalism**, literally the understanding of many different cultures, we come to understand the very different ways that different groups of people approach issues, construct identities, and create institutions that express their needs.

Globalization focuses on larger, **macrolevel analysis**, which examines large-scale institutional processes such as the global marketplace, corporations, and transnational institutions such as the United Nations or World Bank. Multiculturalism stresses both the macrolevel unequal distribution of rewards based on class, race, region, gender, and the like, and also the **microlevel analysis**, which focuses on the ways in which different groups of people and even individuals construct their identities based on their membership in those groups. For example, the globalization of the media industries allows

books, magazines, movies, television programs, and music from almost every country to be consumed all over the world. A macrolevel analysis of globalization might point to ways global information exchange promotes interconnection and mutual understanding. A microlevel, multiculturalist analysis might point out, however, that the flow of information is mostly one way, from the West and particularly the United States into other countries, dominating other cultures, reinforcing global economic inequalities, and promoting a homogeneous, Westernized global society. Or a multiculturalist might argue that global media, particularly the Internet, are playing a role in reinvigorating local cultures and identities by promoting mixing and fusion and by allowing a diversity of voices—including “alternative” and “radical” ones—to be heard (Williams, 2003).



Kirk Anderson, www.kirktoons.com. Used by permission.

**Globalization and Multiculturalism: Interrelated Forces.** Today the world often seems to alternate between feeling like a centrifuge, in which everything at the center is scattered into millions of individual, local particles, and a great gravitational vacuum collects all these local, individual particles into a congealing center.

There are numerous, formerly unimaginable changes that go under the heading of “globalization”—scientific advances, technological breakthroughs that connect

TABLE 1.2

Major Sociological Schools of Thought, 1950–2000					
THEORY	LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	ORDER: WHAT HOLDS SOCIETY TOGETHER?	INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIETY	CHANGE	DIRECTION OF CHANGE
Structural-functionalism	Macro	Society is a stable system of interrelated elements—shared values, institutions—and there is general agreement (consensus) about how society should work.	Individuals are integrated into society by socialization.	Incomplete integration leads to deviance.  Change is progressive.	Positive  Society is evolving to more and more equality.
Conflict theory	Macro	Society is a dynamic tension between unequal groups marked by an unequal distribution of rewards and goods.	Individuals belong to different groups that compete for resources.	Groups mobilize to get greater goods.	Short term: conflict  Longer term: greater equality
Symbolic interactionism	Micro	Society is a set of processes among individuals and groups, using symbolic forms (language, gestures, performance) to create identity and meaning.	Individuals connect to others symbolically.	Tension between institutions and individual identity.	No direction specified

people all over the globe, the speed and integration of commercial and economic decisions, the coherence of multinational political organizations and institutions—like the recently “invented” European Union and G8 organizations, not to mention the older and venerable organizations like the United Nations (founded in 1945) and NATO (founded in 1950). The increased globalization of production of the world’s goods—companies doing business in every other country—is coupled with increasingly similar patterns of consumption as teenagers all over the world are listening to Eminem or Britney Spears, on portable stereo equipment made in Japan, talking on cell phones made in Finland, wearing clothing from Gap that is manufactured in Thailand, walking in Nikes or Reeboks, shopping at malls that feature the same boutiques, which they drive to in cars made in Germany or Japan, using gasoline refined by American or British companies from oil extracted from the Arabian peninsula.

Just as our societies are changing dramatically, bringing the world closer and closer together, so too are those societies changing, becoming multiracial and multicultural. Increasingly, in industrial societies, the old divisions between women and men and among various races and ethnicities are breaking down. Women and men



# Sociology and our World

## Defining Globalization

There are many definitions of globalization. The one here is from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a major research and policy institution.

### What Is Globalization?

Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations. The process is driven by international trade and investment and is aided by information technology. Its effects extend from the environment, to culture, to political systems, to economic development and prosperity, to human physical well-being in societies around the world.

Globalization is not new. For thousands of years, people—and, later, corporations—have been buying from and selling to each other in lands at great distances, such as through the famed Silk Road across Central Asia that connected China and Europe during the Middle Ages. Likewise, for centuries, people and corporations have invested in enterprises in other countries. In fact, many of the features of the current wave of globalization

are similar to those prevailing before the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

But policy and technological developments of the past few decades have spurred increases in cross-border trade, investment, and migration so large that many observers believe the world has entered a qualitatively new phase in its economic development. Since 1950, for example, the volume of world trade has increased by twenty times, and from just 1997 to 1999 flows of foreign investment nearly doubled, from \$468 billion to \$827 billion. Distinguishing this current wave of globalization from earlier ones, author Thomas Friedman has said that today globalization is “farther, faster, cheaper, and deeper.”

Globalization is deeply controversial. Proponents of globalization claim that it allows poor countries and their citizens to develop economically and raise their standards of living. Opponents of globalization argue that the creation of an unfettered international free market has benefited multinational corporations in the Western world at the expense of local enterprises, local cultures, and common people. Resistance to globalization has therefore taken shape both at a popular and at a governmental level as people and governments try to manage the flow of capital, labor, goods, and ideas that constitute the current wave of globalization.

are increasingly similar: Both work, and both care for children, and the traits that were formerly associated with one sex or the other are increasingly blurred. Most of us know that we possess both the capacity for aggression, ambition, and technical competence, as well as the ability to be compassionate and caring. Industrial countries like the United States or the nations of Europe are increasingly multicultural: Gone are the days when to be American meant being able to trace your lineage to the Mayflower or when to be Swedish meant uniformly blond hair and blue eyes. Today, even the U.S. Census cannot keep up with how much we’re changing: The fastest growing racial category in the United States in the year 2005 was “biracial.” Just who are “we” anyway?

At the same time that we’ve never been closer or more similar to each other, the boundaries between us have never been more sharply drawn. The collapse of the former Soviet Union led to the establishment of dozens of new nations, based entirely on ethnic identity. The terrifying explosion of a murderous strain of Islamic fundamentalism vows to purify the world of all nonbelievers. Virtually all the wars of the past two decades have been interethnic conflicts, in which one ethnic group has attempted to eradicate another from within the nation’s borders—not necessarily because of some primitive bloodlust on the part of those neighboring cultures but because the political entities in which they were forced to live, nation-states, were themselves the artificial creations of powerful nations at the end of the past century. The Serbian aggression against Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo; the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda; the past or current tribal civil wars in Somalia or Congo; plus dozens of smaller-scale interethnic wars have given the world a new term for the types of wars we witness now—*ethnic cleansing*.

The drive for uniformity as the sole basis for unity, for sameness as the sole basis for security, leads to internal efforts at perpetual self-purification—as if by completely

excluding “them,” we get to know what “us” means. Such efforts are accompanied by a dramatic (and often violent) restoration of traditional roles for women and men. Women are “refeminized” by being forced back into the home, under lock and key as well as under layers of physical concealment; men are “remasculinized” by being required to adopt certain physical traits and return to traditional clothing and the imposition of complete control over women.

*Religion, blood, folk, nation*—these are the terms we use to specify who we are and who they are not. The boundaries between us have never been more sharply drawn—nor have they ever been so blurred.

These trends play themselves out not only on the global stage but also within each society. In the economic North, there are calls for returns to some idealized visions of pristine purity of racial bloodlines, to religious fundamentals, to basics like the ’50s vision of the family—the 1850s, that is. And in many societies in Africa or Latin America, there are signs of increased multiculturalism, tolerance for difference, the embracing of technological innovation and secular humanist science. Neither side is as monochromatic as stereotypes might imagine it to be.

We often imagine the past and the present as a set of opposites. The past was bucolic, stable, unchanging; society today is a mad rush of dizzying social changes that we can barely grasp. But neither vision is completely true. “Just as there was more change among past peoples than often meets the eye,” writes sociologist Harvey Molotch, “so there is more stability in the modern world than might be thought” (Molotch, 2003, p. 94).

And most of us adopt an idiosyncratic combination of these trends. The terrorists of al-Qaeda, who seek a return to a premodern Islamic theocracy, keep in touch with wireless Web access and a sophisticated technological system while Americans, their sworn archenemy, the embodiment of secularism, stream to church every Sunday in numbers that dwarf those of European nations. We speak with patriotic fervor of closing our borders to non-Americans, while we merrily consume products from all over the world. (I recently saw a bumper sticker that said “Buy American”—on a Honda Civic.)

**Global Tensions.** These two master trends—globalization and particularism; secular, scientific, and technological advances and religious fundamentalism, ethnic purification, and local tribalisms—are not simply the final conflict between two competing worldviews, a “clash of civilizations” as one eminent political scientist calls it. Such a view imagines these as two completely separate entities, now on a collision course for global conflagration, and ignores the ways in which each of these trends is a reaction to the other, is organized in response to the other, is, in the end, *produced* by the other. And such a view also misses the ways in which these master trends are contained within any society—indeed, within all of us.

Globalization is often viewed as increasing homogeneity around the world. The sociologist George Ritzer calls it **McDonaldization**—the homogenizing spread of consumerism around the globe (1996). *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (2000) once predicted that “no two countries which both have a McDonald’s will go to war with each other.”

Friedman’s prediction turned out to be wrong—in part because he saw only that part of globalization that flattens the world and minimizes cultural and national differences. But globalization is also accompanied by multiculturalism, an increased awareness of the particular aspects of our specific identities, and a resistance to losing them to some global identity, which most people find both grander and blander. In the words of political scientist Benjamin Barber (1996), our world is characterized by *both* “McWorld” and “Jihad”—the integration into “one commercially homogeneous network” and also increased tribalization and separation.



▲ Religion can bring us together in joy and song . . .



▲ . . . or drive us apart in anger and hatred.

Globalization and multiculturalism express *both* the forces that hold us together—whether the repression of armies, police forces, and governments or the shared values of nationalism or ethnic pride—and the forces that drive us apart. These are, actually, the same forces.

For example, religion both maintains cohesiveness among members and serves as one of the principal axes of division among people in the world today. Ethnicity provides a sense of stable identity and a way of distinguishing ourselves from others, as well as a way that society unequally allocates resources. Gender, race, youth/age, and social class also contribute to stable identity and can help us feel connected to groups, but they similarly serve as major contributors to social inequality, thus pulling society apart.

One impetus for the recognition of globalization and multiculturalism as among the central organizing principles of society is the continued importance of *race*, *class*, and *gender* in social life. In the past half century, we've become increasingly aware of the centrality of these three categories of experience. Race, class, and gender are among the most important axes around which social life revolves, the organizing mechanisms of institutions, the foundations of our identities. Along with other forms of identity and mechanisms of inequality—ethnicity, sexuality, age, and religion—they form a matrix through which we understand ourselves and our world.

## Sociology and Modernism

One of the central themes of virtually all of the classical sociological theories was an abiding faith in the idea of progress. This idea—that society is moving from a less developed to a more

developed (and therefore better) stage—is a hallmark of the idea of **modernism**. In classical sociological theory, modernism was expressed as the passage from religious to scientific forms of knowledge (Comte), from mechanical to organic forms of solidarity (Durkheim), from feudal to capitalist to communist modes of production (Marx), from traditional to legal forms of authority (Weber). In the twentieth century, structural functionalists hailed the movement from extended to nuclear family forms and from arbitrary rule by aristocrats to universal legal principles as emblems of social progress.

Yet many of the founders of sociology were also deeply ambivalent about progress. Tocqueville saw democracy as inevitable but potentially dangerous to individual freedom. Durkheim saw that organic solidarity required constant effort to maintain the levels of integration that individuals would feel, so they would not drift away from social life. Marx bemoaned the fact that members of the working class would have to experience great deprivation before they would rise up against capitalism. And Weber saw the very mechanism of individual freedom, rationality, coming back to trap us in an iron cage of meaninglessness.

Today, we live in an age in which the very idea of progress from one stage to the next has been called into question. For one thing, it's clear that no society ever passes from one stage fully into the next. We can see pieces of both mechanical and organic solidarity all around us. In the most advanced societies, kinship, "blood," and primordial ethnic identity continue to serve as a foundation for identity; in some of the least developed countries, young people are using the Internet and hanging out on Facebook. Societies maintain both feudal relations and capitalist ones—including

those countries that call themselves communist! We are governed by authorities that rely on traditional, charismatic, and legal rationales.

What's more, the world has become so interdependent that one society cannot exist in isolation from others. The development of one society toward different ways of organizing social life (replacing tribal elders with elected representatives, for example) is heavily influenced by the global marketplace, by transnational organizations like the United Nations, and by ideas that circulate over the globe via transportation, telecommunications, and the media faster than any classical theorist could ever have imagined. We no longer see less developed societies as the image of our past, any more than they see Europe or the United States as an image of their future.

Sociology remains a deeply “modern” enterprise: Most sociologists believe that science and reason can solve human problems and that people's lives can be improved by the application of these scientifically derived principles. Yet sociologists are also reexamining the fixed idea of progress and seeing a jumble of conflicting possibilities that exist at any historical moment rather than the inevitable unfolding of a single linear path. As a concept, postmodernism originated in architecture, as a critique of the uniformity of modern buildings. Using elements from classical and modern, postmodernists prefer buildings that are not fixed and uniform but rather a collage, a collision of styles in a new form.

In sociology, **postmodernism** suggests that the meaning of social life may not be found in conforming to rigid patterns of development but rather in the creative assembling of interactions and interpretations that enable us to negotiate our way in the world. In the postmodern conception of the world, the fundamentals of society—structure, culture, agency—are all challenged and in flux. Thus we are simultaneously freer and more creative and also potentially more frightened, more lost, and more alone.

In the face of these postmodernist ideas, the modern world has also witnessed a rebirth of “premodern” ideas. Premodern ideas—kinship, blood, religion, tribe—were the ideas first challenged by the Enlightenment view of the world, from which sociology emerged in the nineteenth century. The increased freedom of postmodern society—the ability to make up the rules as you go along—is accompanied by increased fatalism, a belief that all is entirely preordained.

There has been a dramatic increase in religious beliefs, New Age consciousness, and other nonscientific ways of explaining our lives and our place in the universe. The forces that were supposed to disappear as the bases for social life have remained and even strengthened as some of the world's most powerful mechanisms for uniting people into connected clans and dividing us into warring factions. The global economy, potentially an unprecedented force for economic growth and development worldwide, brings us together into a web of interconnected interests and also widens the ancient divide between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, chosen and dispossessed.

Contemporary society consists of all these elements; just as modern society is the collision of premodern and postmodern. Understanding this collision—creative and chaotic, compassionate and cruel—is the task of sociology in the twenty-first century.

## Sociology in the 21st Century, Sociology and You

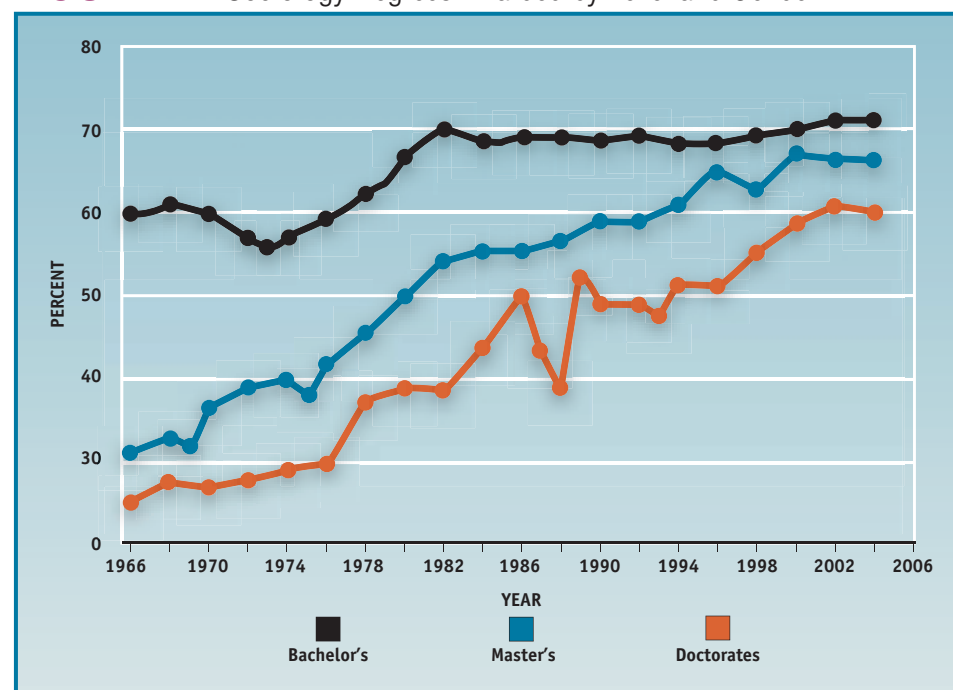
Sociologists are part of a larger network of social scientists. Sociologists work in colleges and universities, teaching and doing research, but they also work in government organizations, doing research and policy analysis; in social movements, developing strategies; and in large and small organizations, public and private.

Sociologists reflect and embody the processes we study, and the changes in the field of sociology are, in a way, a microcosm of the changes we observe in the society in which we live. And, over the past few decades, the field has undergone more dramatic changes than many of the other academic fields of study. Sociology's mission is the understanding—without value judgments—of different groups, and, as you will see, to understand the dynamics of both *identity* and *inequality* that belonging to these groups brings, as well as the different institutions—the family, education, workplace, media, religious institution, and the like—in which we experience social life. It makes a certain logical sense, therefore, that many members of marginalized groups, such as racial, sexual, and ethnic minorities and women, would find a home in sociology.

Once, of course, all academic fields of study were the dominion of White men. Today, however, women and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities have transformed collegiate life. Not that long ago, women were excluded from many of the most prestigious colleges and universities; now women outnumber men on virtually every college campus. Not that long ago, racial minorities were excluded from many of America's universities and colleges; today universities have special recruiting task forces to insure a substantial minority applicant pool. Not that long ago, gays and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people were expelled from colleges and universities for violating ethics or morals codes; today there are LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) organizations on most college campuses.

Sociology has been one of the fields that has pioneered this inclusion. It is a source of pride to most sociologists that today sociology is among the most diverse fields on any campus.

**FIGURE 1.1** Sociology Degrees Awarded by Level and Gender

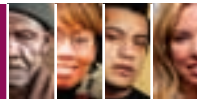


Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Completions, 1966–2004* (Washington, DC: NCES, 2006). Retrieved from <http://caspar.nsf.gov> (November 8, 2006).

In the past 50 years (since 1966), the percentage of B.A. degrees in sociology awarded to women has increased 98.7 percent, while the percentage of M.A. degrees rose 336.9 percent, and the percentage of Ph.D. degrees rose a whopping 802.5 percent (Figure 1.1). At the same time, the percentage of African American Ph.D.s in sociology has more than doubled, while the percentage of Hispanic Ph.D.s nearly tripled in the same period, and Asian American degrees more than doubled—all of these are the highest percentages of any social science (American Sociological Association, 2007).

We live in a society composed of many different groups and many different cultures, subcultures, and countercultures, speaking different languages, with different kinship networks and different values and norms. It's noisy, and we rarely agree on anything. And yet we also live in a society where the overwhelming majority of people obey the same laws and are civil to one another and in which we respect the differences among those different groups. We live in a society characterized by a fixed hierarchy and in a society in which people believe firmly in the idea of mobility, a society in which one's fixed, ascribed characteristics (race, class, and sex) are the single best determinants of where one will end up, and a society in which we also believe anyone can make it if he or she works hard enough.

This is the world sociologists find so endlessly fascinating. This is the world about which sociologists develop their theories, test their hypotheses, and conduct their research. Sociology is the lens through which we look at this dizzying array of social life—and begin to try and make sense of it. Welcome to it—and welcome to sociology as a new way of seeing that world.



## Chapter Review

1. **What is sociology?** Sociology is a field of study and way of thinking that helps us to understand the world around us and how we fit into it by looking at the construction and development of identity, society, relationships, and inequality. Sociologists don't think in terms of either/or; rather, they examine social issues and problems in terms of both/and, interconnectedness, and always within a larger social context.
2. **What does it mean to “do” sociology?** Sociology is both an academic field and a way of seeing the world. It uses theoretical models and standardized research methods to understand social phenomena. Sociologists understand that things are complex and that the individual view is incomplete, so they always try to see the bigger picture and look at issues from various angles.
3. **Where did sociology come from?** During the Enlightenment period in Europe, there was a general shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview—from religion to science as the source of knowledge and explanations of reality. Sociology began as an attempt to understand the changes society was undergoing. These changes led to the sociological inquiry of the nature of community, government, and the economy; the meaning of individualism and increased secularism; and the nature and direction of change.
4. **What did the early sociologists think?** Considered the founder of sociology, Auguste Comte believed that society's development was based on forms of knowledge—religious, metaphysical, and scientific—and how they explain the world. Thus, as forms of knowledge changed, society changed accordingly. Alexis de Tocqueville showed how democracy both enhances and erodes individual liberty, while Karl Marx saw class as the organizing principle of social life. Emile Durkheim used his study of suicide to show how the bonds between the individual and society affect human behavior, and Max Weber studied the importance of rationality in the modern world and developed a sociology that was both interpretive and value free. Weber also expanded Marx's analysis of social stratification by adding status and party to social class as determinants of social status. Georg Simmel showed how forms of social interaction are used by individuals to combine into groups.



### 5. How did sociology develop beyond the main thinkers?

Early sociologists in the United States included Thorstein Veblen, who argued that the wealthy were not productive and instead engaged in what he coined “conspicuous consumption.” Lester Ward was the first sociologist to reject the evolutionary model of social change; he believed that social change should be planned and that society should be reformed into a welfarelike state, and George Herbert Mead showed how individuals developed through social processes and self-reflection. Not all sociologists were White or male; Mary Wollstonecraft was the first major feminist. She argued that women should be educated the same as men or society would never progress. Frederick Douglass, a former slave and prolific author, was very influential in the abolitionist movement, while W. E. B. Du Bois founded the NAACP and wrote 19 books on race. He is now considered one of the greatest sociologists in history.

### 6. What are the major contemporary sociological perspectives?

Three main paradigms, or ways of thinking, have dominated sociological inquiry. Symbolic interactionists explain how interactions with the environment help people develop a sense of self. Structural functionalists stress equilibrium in society and examine how institutions function to reproduce social life. Conflict theorists believe that society evolves from conflict among groups. Today, sociologists increasingly view the world through the lenses of globalism and multiculturalism. Globalization, or the economic, political, cultural, and social interconnectedness among people around the world, spreads culture and values and has both positive and negative consequences. Using the multicultural lens, sociologists understand the different ways that people see the world, construct selves, and create institutions. Today’s sociologists understand that race, class, gender, and sexuality are intersections of identity, and one cannot be studied without taking the others into account.

## Key Terms

Canon (p. 20)

Conflict theory (p. 25)

Generalized other (p. 20)

Globalization (p. 26)

Latent functions (p. 24)

Macrolevel analysis (p. 26)

Manifest functions (p. 24)

McDonaldization (p. 29)

Mechanical solidarity (p. 17)

Microlevel analysis (p. 26)

Modernism (p. 30)

Multiculturalism (p. 26)

Organic solidarity (p. 17)

Paradigm (p. 23)

Postmodernism (p. 31)

Social Darwinism (p. 19)

Sociological imagination (p. 4)

Sociology (p. 5)

Structural functionalism (p. 23)

Symbolic interactionism (p. 23)

What  
does  
*America*  
think?



### How Religious Are People?

These are actual survey data from the General Social Survey, 2004.

**About how often do you pray?** Almost 60 percent of respondents reported praying at least once a day. Women were more likely than men to pray several times a day or once a day. Results for examining by race were also striking, with 55 percent of Black respondents praying several times a day as compared to 27 percent of White respondents.

#### CRITICAL THINKING | DISCUSSION QUESTION

1. What social and cultural factors do you think account for the gender differences in reports of prayer frequency? What about the race difference?

▶ Go to this website to look further at the data. You can run your own statistics and crosstabs here: <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsta+gss04>

**REFERENCES:** Davis, James A., Tom W. Smith, and Peter V. Marsden. General Social Surveys 1972–2004: [Cumulative file] [Computer file]. 2nd ICPSR version. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center [producer], 2005; Storrs, CT: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut; Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research; Berkeley, CA: Computer-Assisted Survey Methods Program, University of California [distributors], 2005.