# WHY ARE RACE & ETHNICITY SO IMPORTANT?

# WHAT IS A 21ST-CENTURY FAMILY?

# HOW IS SEXUALITY CHANGING?

# THE SOCIOLOGY PROJECT 3.0

## INTRODUCING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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# IS THERE A DOMINANT CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES?

# WHY IS AMERICA SO UNEQUAL?

# WILL DEMOCRACY SURVIVE?

# WHAT ARE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS?

# WHEN DO SOCIETIES CHANGE?

# WHY ARE THERE SO MANY PEOPLE IN PRISON?

# The Sociology Project 3.0

## Introducing the Sociological Imagination

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# Preface

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, his famous study of the history of science, Thomas Kuhn argued that introductory textbooks are inevitably the most backward part of any scientific field. He suggested that because they seek to appeal to the lowest common denominator to maximize their audience, they reproduce well-known but out-of-date ideas and findings far removed from the cutting edge of knowledge. Even worse, Kuhn argued, they provide beginning students an entirely misleading view of the discipline. When it comes to sociology textbooks, Kuhn's claim may be reinforced by the simple fact that sociology is such a wide-ranging discipline, with many rich subfields with their own bodies of scholarship and knowledge, that no one author (or small team of authors), however well-meaning and determined, can possibly attain mastery of the whole discipline (and adequately convey that knowledge to students).

We created this introductory text in the hopes of overcoming the problem Kuhn so famously identified. Our aim was nothing less than to reinvent the way we write introductory sociology texts, and at least one imitator has since appeared. We envision an entirely new kind of introduction to the discipline, one that draws on the collective wisdom of a large, successful sociology department and its faculty to bring to our students and readers the real excitement of each of the main subfields of sociology. Rather than reproducing what is said in existing textbooks, as so often happens, the chapters in this book are freshly updated by one or more faculty members (or in a couple of cases, by former faculty members who have moved to other universities) from the New York University Sociology Department who write and teach in the area and are at the cutting edge of their field. In this way, we seek to bring together the best of sociology as a discipline to meet the challenge of reaching our students.

At the center of this book is a set of tools for learning how to ask hard questions about the world around us. These tools are what we call, following C. Wright Mills, the "sociological imagination." In every chapter, we draw upon contemporary research findings, those of our colleagues and in some cases our own, to puzzle through how individuals are shaped by the contexts in which they live and act. We treat social norms, organizations, institutions, and global dynamics as a linked set of puzzles to explore. We identify the kinds of questions that sociological researchers are asking—and for students, learning how to ask such questions is a first step to thinking about the world in a sociological way. We introduce some ways of answering those questions, including the kinds of research,

data, and key findings we can use. We do not suggest that all of the answers are at hand, but we show how and in what ways sociologists and other social scientists struggle to answer them. If nothing else, we hope that our readers will take away from this book a determination to question things they observe every day in the social worlds they inhabit, and that they will also recognize that we can get closer to answering those questions with some sociological theories and insights.

We have entitled our text *The Sociology Project*, both to reflect our commitment to a collective agenda to understanding all of the different subfields of sociology as an evolving project and, as we move to version 3.0 in both print and digital format, because we want to signal to our readers our intention to continue to develop the book in future editions as sociology itself evolves. New findings, theories, and ideas are constantly being developed, and this iteration reflects those changes with a major overhaul of each chapter. Our book will continue to evolve as research develops in new directions, and we look forward to revising our ideas and questions as the evidence suggests we should. But perhaps most importantly, we think of this updated edition—*The Sociology Project 3.0*—as a dialogue with our readers, including both our students and our sociology colleagues around the country who use the text to introduce their students to sociology. We invite you to engage and challenge us where we come up short, tell us what we are doing wrong, and share ideas you have for the presentation of sociology as a field.

Jeff Manza for the NYU Sociology Department
New York City
July 2021

## New to This Edition

This new edition of *The Sociology Project* (*TSP*) has been thoroughly revised and updated to integrate new analyses and discussions of important recent developments in American society. The text uses the example of the COVID-19 pandemic to uncover how and why social interaction is so important to us, and to show how the pandemic has revealed hidden inequalities and institutional dysfunction in America today. It also analyzes the recent national protests over racism, specifically as they relate to the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality, as well as the #MeToo and environmental movements, and the growing prominence of right-wing militia groups (including those who participated in the attack on the U.S. Capitol seeking to overthrow the results of a democratic election in January 2021). These various movements and

recent developments have raised important questions about how social processes and institutions work today. We expand our discussion of policing in reworked chapters on organizations, deviance, and criminal justice. We explore several new theories about systematic racism and White racial identity in the reworked chapter on "Race and Ethnicity" (now Chapter 13). We also added a completely new chapter on the sociology of American democracy (the latter addressing rising concerns about political polarization and the threats to democracy that sharpened in the Trump era and its immediate aftermath). We have also expanded coverage of markets, organizations, and work by creating two new chapters: Chapter 9, "Markets and Organizations: The Sociology of Economic Life," discusses the different types of capitalist economies and the new economic sociology, and contains dedicated sections on the sociology of organizations, while Chapter 12, "Jobs, Occupations, and Professions: The Sociology of Work," examines occupations (old and new), the nature of work and the labor process, and the future of the labor market. To give a greater sense of these changes and others, here is a brief summary of the updates to each chapter.

## Part I The Sociological Enterprise

1. **The Sociological Imagination**
   In this chapter, we introduce the COVID-19 pandemic as a central example in considering what a sociological imagination can uncover and how sociology gives us a window on social inequalities and institutions.

2. **Social Theory**
   We have added Jane Addams as one of the founding figures of social theory (along with Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Du Bois) and further expanded our discussion of the immense contributions of W. E. B Du Bois. We also include new content on the theory of historical materialism according to Marx and contemporary neo-Marxists.

3. **Studying the Social World**
   We provide a new Big Question on "Big Data" and how to use new kinds of computational research methods for social research. We have also developed a new section on field experiments, which are a great tool for beginning students to conduct sociological research. Finally, we revised our discussion of survey research to incorporate new developments (another research tool that is possible for undergraduates to deploy).

## Part II Building Blocks of Societies

4. **Social Interaction**
   This chapter presents updated and current examples throughout, particularly regarding COVID-19, to highlight the human need for interaction.

5. **Social Structure**
   Here, we provide expanded coverage of roles and role conflict, group identities, and social hierarchies, as well as a new and more extensive discussion of the concept of institutional fields and the concept of the institutional order.

6. **Environment and Society**
   We have moved this chapter earlier in the book to highlight the importance of the relationship between humans and the environment, particularly amidst the threat of global warming and climate change. We have also provided updated examples on environmental injustice and a discussion of the public/private paradox, as well as coverage of the role of human/animal contact as a contributing factor in the rise of new viral diseases (such as COVID-19).

7. **Deviance and Social Control**
   We have placed this chapter in a new, more primary location to stress the importance of social control as a core feature of society. We've extended our discussion of labeling theory; explored white-collar crime and corporate deviance in more detail, including a case study of Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer of Oxy-Contin; and added a new section on police deviance and the protections from sanction that police officers have long enjoyed.

8. **Power and Politics**
   While still retaining the core ideas from the previous edition and Steven Lukes's three dimensions of power, we've heavily revised and expanded this chapter to focus more systematically on how political systems still favor the interests of the powerful, while relocating the content on American democracy to the new Chapter 21.

9. **Markets and Organizations: The Sociology of Economic Life**
   This new chapter focuses on capitalist markets, the varieties of capitalism in the world today, and the sociological approach to studying economic markets, as well on organizations, their importance for social and economic life, and their relationship to the external environment.

10. **Culture, Media, and Communication**
    This chapter contains increased coverage and examples of ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and ethnonationalist views that have become more central in the United States and around the world with the rise of right-wing populism. We also discuss the significance of social media in changing the nature of political communication, as exemplified by former president Donald Trump's use of Twitter and his overall communication strategy, and how this played a role in the assault on the U.S. Capitol in January 2021. In addition, the chapter examines the pressures and challenges on contemporary journalism

and the news media and provides updated examples of the ways the Internet has created new opportunities and dangers for media and democracy.

## Part III Inequalities

11. **Inequality and Poverty**

    We have significantly revised the historical treatment of inequality in this chapter, including new discussions of the rise of the welfare state and high-end inequality. We also present updated data on income inequality and reasons why economic inequality has increased in the United States in recent years, specifically related to earnings of college and non-college graduates, why the rich get richer, and the impact of globalization on the economy and employment. The chapter also contains new information on declining social mobility, factors that increase the likelihood of poverty, and more clearly describes individual versus structural sources of poverty than earlier additions.

12. **Jobs, Occupations, and Professions: The Sociology of Work**

    This is a new chapter dedicated to the sociology of work. It includes Big Questions on professional occupations, an extended discussion of the gig economy and self-employment, as well as new coverage on the nature of power in the workplace, the role of unions, what makes a good job, and the central challenges facing workers today.

13. **Race and Ethnicity**

    New and updated coverage and examples appear throughout, particularly regarding systemic racism, color-blind racism, and disparities in the treatment of people of color in the criminal justice system, as well in health care coverage and political participation. We also include a new section on the Black Lives Matter movement, White supremacism, and the future of race politics.

14. **Gender and Sexualities**

    Now entitled "Gender and Sexualities" (formerly "Gender and Sexuality") to highlight the recent trends toward more expansive understandings of sexual orientation, this chapter contains fresh examples, more current data on education, testing, and income gaps based on gender; discussion of nonbinary individuals, and a new section on the varieties of unwanted sexual encounters, such as rape and sexual harassment, and the rise of the #MeToo movement.

15. **Cities and Communities**

    In this chapter we have added a new Big Question on rural communities. We discuss the evolution and characteristics of rural communities, as well as the challenges of economic decline many are facing. We also provide updated sections on suburban patterns of settlement, urban poverty, and racial and ethnic segregation.

## Part IV Core Institutions

16. **Families and Family Life**

    This chapter offers updated data and examples on the changing nature of families and the challenges of developing relationships and families.

17. **Sociology of Religion**

    NYU sociologist Iddo Tavory joins us this edition after the passing of the chapter's original author (Gerald Marwell), providing significant updates and examples of how we define religion, religion as a social institution, the role of theodicy, religious conversion, the varieties of new religious movements, the relationship between gender and religiosity in various major religions, and the classical sociological theory of secularization.

18. **Education**

    Significantly revised, this chapter has a new Big Question on higher education that discusses the challenges facing colleges today. It also presents new material on the early rise of educational systems in America, the concepts of active learning and human capital, income inequality and schooling, education and the elite, comparative differences in schooling around the world, the effects of homeschooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, and much more.

19. **Health and Medicine**

    This chapter contains a new opener on the COVID-19 pandemic, and a new Big Question on epidemics and society that reveals long-standing patterns of how societies respond to epidemics. We have also added a new section on the rise of the opioid epidemic. In addition, it presents new content on autism, the role of insurance in health care, and updated data and statistics throughout.

20. **Crime and Punishment**

    A new Big Question presents expanded coverage of the role of racism in the criminal justice system, incorporating recent data on police shootings and brutality. We've also added new sections on the decline of crime and content on social disorganization, revised sections on modern theories of crime and punishment, and updated material on incarceration rates in the United States and comparable countries.

21. **American Democracy and Political Life**

    This new chapter provides a sociological analysis of contemporary American politics and the consequences of aging political institutions anchored by a Constitution created in the eighteenth century. We cover the question of how "democratic" American political institutions

really are, why voter turnout remains so low (in spite of the recent uptick in the Trump era), how and why some groups are attempting to restrict access to the ballot in various ways, the costs and consequences of political polarization, and how powerful groups are able to "get their way" in the making of government policies (considering, for example, the role of political money).

## Part V Social Processes and Social Change

22. **Social Movements and Revolutions**
    Several key changes can be found in this chapter. We include discussions of recent social movements and protest events: Black Lives Matter and the events on January 6, 2021, when hundreds of supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., in attempt to overthrow the results of the 2020 election.

23. **Population, Aging, and Social Demography**
    We provide updated statistics and data throughout this chapter, specifically on population growth and change as well as on rates of immigration.

24. **Immigration**
    This chapter presents updated statistics on immigration and information on unauthorized immigrants and the effects of immigration on children, particularly regarding the stripping of DACA protections during the Trump presidency, as well as content on Americans' attitudes toward immigration.

25. **Globalization**
    We've added new sections on the impact of globalization on social and cultural life and the globalization of ideas and politics across borders, specifically as it relates to the United Nations and recent developments with the European Union.

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## Author's Note on Terminology

Jeff Manza

The terms and language we use to describe different groups in contemporary societies has always been controversial. Language can all too easily become a form of social oppression, especially when members of a more powerful group choose terms with negative connotations for subordinate or historically disadvantaged groups. In recent years, debates about appropriate terms has become especially heated, while at the very same time that terminology is shifting and unsettled.

For an introductory sociology textbook, many of the traditional terms long used to describe groups, especially in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, are being challenged and are evolving. Getting the language right is important—but not easy. As we complete revisions to this textbook in the spring of 2021, there are several unsettled and sometimes controversial new terms coming into use, as well as vigorous debates about what is and what is not appropriate. We have had to make choices that may not satisfy everyone. And it is possible that one or more of the choices we have made will appear out of date to some readers in a few years.

It's important to keep in mind that decisions on terminology often correlate to usage in sociological research findings, and this may not always correspond to emerging everyday practices. For example, consider gender. The man/woman binary is increasingly seen as out of date, yet much of the data we have to work with classifies all respondents as "men" or "women." An issue like the gender gap in pay—men earn about 20 percent more income than women—is a critically important and ongoing aspect of gender inequality, one that persists even in the face of laws that are supposed to eliminate it. To not discuss the extent of the gender gap in income between individuals who are coded in research studies or datasets as "men" and "women," would be sociological malpractice. But at the same time, those who reject the traditional gender binary (i.e., man versus woman) may feel as if we are writing them out of the picture. This is not our intention. Hopefully, future researchers will develop surveys and other data collections that gather information about nonbinary and trans people, and in a few years we will be better positioned to analyze the impact of a wider range of gender identities and inequalities. The same lesson applies to other terminological controversies. But for now, we would still insist that it is important to use the data we currently have to discuss group differences in income, wealth, education, politics, crime, and other topics, especially when we are examining historical trends where we simply don't have data that match contemporary or emerging terms and identities.

There are also choices we have made throughout the book that reflect deep and ongoing theoretical and political challenges, not just data limitations. Although the terms used to describe groups can create problems across many types of social identities, the most contested terms concern those for racial and ethnic groups, as well as gender identities and sexual orientation. Here are the most important of

the choices we have made, and why we believe they are the best available options right now.

**Race/ethnicity terms:** As Ann Morning explains in Chapter 13, racial labels are social constructions, but because they are experienced as real in the world today, we should not shy away from using them for analytical purposes. She then notes that, generally speaking, race is based on (skin) color, while ethnicity is generally based on place of origin (of oneself or one's ancestors). For several decades, the term "African American" has been in wide circulation as a way of describing Black people, while the term "white" (in lower-case) has been applied to people of European ancestry (who historically were thought of as hyphenated Whites, like German-American, Polish-American, or Italian-American). The substitution of African American for Black reflected an ambition to remind people that, just as European-origin Whites have a shared ethnic background, so too do Black Americans have ethnic roots in Africa. The underlying vision of a post-racial society, in which people's backgrounds are thought of primarily in terms of where they are from (ethnicity), rather than their skin color, is an important but as yet unrealized dream. For one thing, although some writers bravely attempted to consistently refer to Whites as "European Americans," this usage did not catch on. In fact, in the decades following World War II, "white" increasingly became a generic, catch-all term for anyone with light skin no matter what their background. As the category grew to encompass around 90 percent of the American population circa 1950, most ethnic descriptors (such as "Italian" or "Irish") seemed to lose most of their meaning. Further, the term "African American," while still in wide use and preferred by many writers, implies a recent connection to a continent that is remote for many, whereas the term Black (or Black American) better captures the unique and tragic experience of oppression arising from slavery, Jim Crow, and the long history of stereotyping and discrimination targeted at Black people across American history. It recognizes a shared fate based on skin color, no matter where one's ancestors came from. The distinction is captured brilliantly by the actor, writer, and hip hop artist Donald Glover's character in the TV show *Atlanta,* when he is asked what part of Africa he is from. Glover replies, "I don't know. See, this spooky thing called slavery happened and my entire ethnic identity was erased."

So throughout the book, we will use the (capitalized) term Black. But this decision raises a different issue. Until recently, the term "white" was generally spelled with lower-case "w." This could imply that lower-case "white" people do not have a race, whereas Black people do. For sociologists, the implications of this are very problematic. For one thing, it makes the concept of White privilege altogether unclear. (How can you be racially privileged if you have no race?) In teaching introductory courses on race, some sociologists will ask their White students when they first realized they were White, which is an unsettling question for some. In my own version of this exercise, I ask my students to anonymously describe (in writing) when they first came to think of themselves as the race that they do today (and what that race is). Many White students will respond that they don't think of themselves as White and/or offer some version of "I think of myself as a person, not a member of a race," or that they began to think of themselves as "White" only when they got to college. It is a remarkable privilege in a racially divided society that some groups can reach early adulthood without having to think about their race, while for others it is a central part of their identity. The asymmetry, then, between "Black" and "white," upon reflection, carries an important implication that sociologists should not ignore. As the historian Nell Irvin Painter has recently written, "No longer should white people be allowed the comfort of this racial invisibility; they should have to see themselves as raced. Being racialized makes white people squirm, so let's racialize them with that capital W." Throughout the book, when we are discussing White and Black people, we will use this parallel approach.

Turning to another complex issue in contemporary language on race/ethnicity, we have chosen to adopt the controversial term "Latinx" throughout the text, rather than either "Hispanic" or the more commonly used "Latino." The term Hispanic has largely fallen out of favor, in large part because today it evokes the colonial history of Spanish imperialism in Latin America. But more recently, feminists have challenged the use of the term "Latino" to describe a group, half of whose members are not men. One solution is "Latino/a," which many writers and sociologists have employed, but it is both clunky and, as members of the LGBTQ community have argued, just reinforces the binary character of gender identity (male/female). In the past decade or so, the term "Latinx" (with no "A" or "O") has come into greater use. It is controversial to use "Latinx" in the sense that most people tracing their roots to Latin America have not (yet) embraced it. (A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found in August 2020 that just 3 percent of people of Latin American origin use the term "Latinx" to describe themselves, and only a quarter had even heard of it.) Imposing a new term before it has been accepted by the group it is meant to describe is not ideal—and the long history of such impositions highlights the dangers. But we also believe that, from a sociological standpoint, a gender-neutral term is strongly preferred for research and analysis, without implying the assertion that it should be used as a self-description for anyone who finds it uncomfortable.

Next, we will follow the dominant current usage of the term "Asian American/Pacific Islander" to describe people who trace their roots to Asia or the Pacific Islands (the

latter includes people from places located mostly in South Pacific, such as Samoa and American Samoa, Tahiti, any of the 600 islands that are part of the Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and the other countries in the Melanesia region, as well as Native Hawaiians). The term "Asian American" emerged in the late 1960s to replace the older and heavily stereotyped term "Oriental" that was in common usage. Later, people from the Pacific Island regions pushed for a separate identification from those from the continent of Asia, arguing that their histories and national circumstances were very different. Sometimes a shorthand "Asian Pacific Islander" is used, but it is (at present) more common to use "Asian American/Pacific Islander" or its acronym (AAPI).

Finally, we continue to use the term "Native American" to refer to the groups that trace their origins to the period before Europeans began to settle in what is now the United States. This term has come under criticism for lumping together many different tribes under one umbrella that ignores their individual histories and cultures. In other countries in North America and South America, the more commonly used term is "Indigenous" people, and Canadians use the term "First Nations." We acknowledge the limits and concerns with the phrase "Native American," but it remains in wide use in the United States, and almost all existing datasets only identify all native peoples in one category, thus compelling us to follow conventional usage.

**Gender/Sexuality Terms:** Just as language relating to race and ethnicity is fraught with complications, so too are terms for gender identity and sexual orientation. As noted, in recent years the gender binary ("male/man/men" and "female/woman/women") has been challenged by transgender and nonbinary people as both denying them a gender identity and, less obviously, privileging people who are comfortable with their birth-assigned gender (for example, gender assignment based on their genitalia). Our solution to this particular issue is to avoid the general use of "he/him" or "she/her" when possible, except when referring to specific individuals. Instead, we try to use the more neutral term "they." This approach, although sometimes grammatically awkward, is becoming more widely adopted by sociologists and other writers, and we believe it is the correct approach moving forward.

Another important issue, which connects gender identities and sexual orientations, is the terms we use to describe the variety of nonconforming groups of people. Throughout the book, when we refer to people who are either sexual or gender nonconforming, we will use the term "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans," or LGBT for short. Some have added "Q" to indicate "queer," creating an "LGBTQ" label. "Queer" is a term adopted by "nonbinary" people, that is, people who reject traditional gender and sexual thinking that divides everyone into "men" or "males" versus "women" or "females," and consider themselves to nonbinary. It is also a bold effort to reclaim what had once been a homophobic slur. However, it is important to note that "queer" continues to have a negative connotation in everyday language, and some in the LGBT community who seek full citizenship and equality reject its use as a descriptor. However, the growth of nonbinary gender identities and the continuing dominant use of "queer" as a descriptor for members of the group makes sense to use it whenever we are referring to all members of gender and sexual communities who are challenging either the heterosexual or gender binary norms.

When referring specifically to sexual orientation, we will use the phrases "same-sex" versus "different-sex" to describe gay and heterosexual couples, respectively. We use "same-sex marriage" to describe a marriage between a man and a man or a woman and a woman. We recognize the endless variety of intimate relationships, including those involving trans or nonbinary people, but we generally lack data to describe or analyze such relationships. This too will hopefully change in the future.

We hope these explanations both clarify our choices and signal our attentiveness to continuing controversies, as well as our desire to avoid offending any of our readers. We draw inspiration from New York University's campus in Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), in which students come from all over the world, with an incredible variety of backgrounds and identities. At NYUAD, constant contact with people from different cultures increases the possibility, or even the likelihood, of using a term that offends someone else. Students on campus have come to adopt a solution: Always assume the best intentions of people, so that the first time someone uses a term that another person finds offensive, avoid leaping to the conclusion that it was done with malicious intent. Often it is simply inadvertent, and most of the time a patient explanation of why some find it harmful is sufficient. It is only when people deliberately disregard such feedback and insist on continuing to use offensive language that we can reach the conclusion that it is being done in a way that is intended to harm. This approach, if widely adopted, would help to avoid many misunderstandings and tensions that currently surround these terms.

# The Sociology Project 3.0

# Chapter 1

# The Sociological Imagination

## by Jeff Manza, Lynne Haney, and Richard Arum

In early December 2019, a physician in Wuhan, China, named Li Wenliang reported that several of his patients were experiencing unexplained and severe respiratory problems. As similar reports began to accumulate in the area, the World Health Organization (WHO) was notified of a potential new health threat (although the Chinese government initially denied it). By early January 2020, Chinese scientists determined that the growing number of respiratory problems found in the people of Wuhan were caused by a new kind of coronavirus (a type of virus that is normally harmless, one of the main causes of the common cold). By the end of January 2020, the WHO had officially declared the outbreak of a new coronavirus and named it SARS-CoV-2. The illness that SARS-CoV-2 can cause in some people was called COVID-19. (The "19" refers to the year the virus was first identified, 2019.) Not long after, cases of COVID-19 began to appear around the world, in places as far apart as Iran, South Korea, and Italy. The first confirmed case in the United States was reported in mid-February 2020 (although it is likely there were earlier, undiagnosed cases). By March, the WHO had declared the coronavirus to be a global pandemic. By Fall 2021, deaths caused by COVID-19 in the United States had exceeded 700,000 even as the rollout of vaccines provided hope for an end to the pandemic.

The rapid spread of this new and highly contagious coronavirus (and the growing number of health problems and deaths associated with it) completely transformed everyday life. To try to limit its spread, governments across the world took drastic steps, ordering people to stay in their homes and shutting down all but the most essential of services. Following a period of quarantine, in which it was hoped that everyone carrying the virus would have recovered, governments began gradually reopening their economies but with strict limits and orders for people to wear masks in public (the one scientifically proven way to prevent the transmission of the virus from person to person). Although there were large differences in how successfully each country implemented these policies—with the United States being one of the least successful—almost every country attempted some version of the same approach. The quarantines quickly led to a very sharp economic downturn and rising unemployment, the closures of schools and churches, and the disruption or complete elimination of public events such as sports, music concerts, theater and film viewings, funerals, and weddings.

The COVID-19 pandemic was miserable for everyone living through it. But it also provides an opportunity to learn important lessons about societies. COVID-19 reminded all of us how closely connected our lives are to others—human

## My Sociological Imagination

### JEFF MANZA

Mark Bussell

Growing up in the college town of Berkeley, California, my family was neither elite (my parents worked for the local university, but not as professors) nor unprivileged. I experienced the differences between these worlds, and in particular the inequalities they represented, as an endlessly fascinating puzzle. I was also always interested in politics and occasionally participated in political protests and movements. My intellectual interest in sociology began to develop while I was an undergraduate student because it provided a way of connecting my emerging concerns about inequality and injustice with a set of theories and ways of studying how those inequalities persist. Since then, I have been exploring how social inequalities influence political life. More recently, I have become interested in how public opinion does or does not shape government policies and how and when public attitudes can be manipulated or misused by political elites. I hope that my work can contribute, in some small way, to making American democracy more representative and egalitarian than it currently is.

Exceptionally long lines at food banks across America during the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in these photos, highlighted how many families are living on the edge of not having enough to.eat and not having enough savings to survive when an economic downturn caused by the pandemic hit. In spite of being one of, if not the, richest country in the world, millions of Americans face the threat of food insecurity — and the pandemic highlighted the depths of this insecurity.

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beings are, after all, social beings, and deprived of so many of the social anchors of daily life, we all suffer. To put it another way, our existence is always connected by our relationships to others. Our individual lives contain stories about **society**, which we can define in simple terms as a large group of people who live in the same area and participate in a common culture. **Sociology**—the study of societies and the social worlds that individuals inhabit within them—seeks to uncover and analyze the patterns that lie beneath the surface of our individual lives. We can better understand the full meaning of COVID-19 by applying a **sociological imagination** (that is, using sociological ideas to understand everyday life).

To see what a sociological imagination can do, let's look at some of the many lessons about society that the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated. First and foremost, the pandemic suggests how fragile our trust in each other—and the government officials and scientific experts guiding the response to the pandemic—can be. Most Americans followed the established scientific guidelines to maintain distance from others and wear masks in public. But many others refused to trust scientific expertise and government guidelines, putting other people at risk by not wearing masks or by attending social events with large numbers of people where the virus can spread.

To take another example, the pandemic highlighted many of the consequences of living in a society with a high degree of inequality that might have otherwise been largely hidden from view. For example, even though the coronavirus itself was an equal-opportunity microbe, seeking any human hosts it could find to take up residence, death rates from COVID-19 were much higher among the poor than the rich. Rich people could obtain much better care if infected, or flee to the safety of more remote locations to reduce their risk of exposure, than poor people and families. Further, poor people living in crowded cities or working in jobs deemed "essential" were exposed daily to the threat of infection. While middle-class and white-collar workers could work safely from their homes during the pandemic, essential workers were compelled to go to their workplaces and expose themselves to risk, many for low pay. Of the millions thrown out of work, poor and even many middle-class families with limited or no savings found themselves in a very vulnerable place. Lines at food pantries sometimes stretched for miles, and **food insecurity** (a condition of not knowing whether you or your family will have enough to eat) soared. In spite of all its wealth, the pandemic highlighted that in the United States, many families live right on the edge of catastrophe. Even something so taken for granted as having enough to eat is not guaranteed.

The COVID-19 pandemic also showed how racism and racial discrimination, so pervasive in American society and history, manifested itself and even took on new forms. Asian Americans were attacked in public as alleged perpetrators of the virus, and young Black men reported being harassed or viewed with suspicion when wearing masks

(that is, even when doing exactly what citizens were supposed to do). Black Americans also died from COVID-19 at rates almost three times that of White Americans, reflecting higher rates of exclusion from the health care system as well as greater exposure to the virus (at work or in the community).

We also learned many important lessons about family life and intimate relationships during the pandemic. Living in close quarters, without the normal release provided by school, work, churches, social activities and in-person time with friends, was very stressful. This was especially for couples and families residing in small apartments or houses. Separation and divorce rates rose, and rates of mental health problems shot up. Parents of all income levels faced hardships having to take care of their children around the clock while also trying to do their jobs, although here again those with resources could find solutions not available to most other families. Poor children suffered from significantly reduced learning during the pandemic, while children in middle class and richer families could count on better quality schools and other resources to reduce those losses. Older family members living in assisted living facilities—among the groups most vulnerable to COVID-19—were denied access to their children and family members, leaving many lonely and depressed.

The pandemic also shed new light on issues and defects of major social institutions that sociologists study very closely. For example, overcrowding and neglect of prisons turned them into places of viral spread and death. The American health care system revealed numerous problems and flaws during the pandemic. Despite the heroic work of frontline health care workers, the United States, which has 4 percent of the world's population, accounted for 20 percent of all global COVID-19 deaths before the arrival of vaccines. That such a rich nation, with a world-class scientific and medical research infrastructure, performed so poorly compared to other similar nations should raise an enormous red flag for every American to think about. How could this have happened?

Finally, a neglected but especially important aspect of the pandemic highlights is our relationship with the natural world. Climate change threatens us, but because its full impact is likely a few decades away, many are prepared to ignore it. But COVID-19 didn't wait to reveal how our current approach to the natural world is deeply troubled. COVID-19 is a what is known as a **zoonotic** disease, one which was caused by a virus that moved from animals to humans. The relentless destruction of natural habitats, for purposes such as mining, ranching, and the construction of ever more human settlements sprawling across the globe, is making it much easier for viruses to migrate from wild animals to humans. Public health experts have been raising concerns about this for a long time, and, in fact, there have been many other close calls with zoonotic diseases in recent years: the bird flu, swine flu, SARS (the first SARS coronavirus), Zika, Ebola, and West Nile virus. Although it appeared to be

a unique, once-in-a-lifetime event, a global pandemic may actually have been long overdue. The 100-year respite from the last major pandemic to strike rich countries like the United States (the influenza virus of 1918–19) may prove, in the future, to have been an exceptionally long *without* an epidemic. Although no one wants to contemplate a similar pandemic, experts believe that if we do not reassess our relationship to the natural world, they are all but certain to recur.

These examples suggest to us some of the many ways in which studying sociology and developing a sociological imagination allows us to see beneath the surface of everyday life, to uncover and understand otherwise hidden features of our societies. It also gives us some tools to think about how we might change them. As we move through our investigation of societies and sociology, we'll find many examples. A central theme throughout the book is that everywhere we look, the unequal distribution of power and economic resources generates social inequalities that continue to divide us along economic, racial/ethnic, gender/sexuality, religious, and other lines.

## The Big Questions

Each chapter in this book identifies a set of questions that have defined the research and teaching puzzles of that topic. These questions organize each chapter and provide a lens for exploring sociological thinking about the topics covered. In starting from questions, not answers, and puzzling together in the search for answers, you will learn to think sociologically. In this first chapter, we will explore the following questions:

1. **What is the sociological imagination, and why is it worth acquiring?** In this section, we introduce the concept of the sociological imagination and explore how it helps us learn to ask hard questions.

2. **What are social contexts, and why do they matter?** We introduce and explore the concept of social contexts. Sociology is fundamentally concerned with how individuals are shaped and influenced by their society. All of us are impacted by an array of social contexts. How do these contexts influence us and guide our behavior?

3. **Where did sociology come from, and how is it different from other social sciences?** Here we examine the social contexts in which sociology itself began to develop, and also explore the question of how sociology relates to the other social sciences.



Mark Bussell

**BIG QUESTION 1.1** What Is the Sociological Imagination, and Why Is It Worth Acquiring?

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Since its inception, sociology has puzzled over how we are connected to each other and the broader societies in which we live. A **sociological imagination** is the capacity to think systematically about how things we experience as *personal* issues—for example, debt from student loans, competing demands from divorced parents, or an inability to form a rewarding romantic relationship, or living through the COVID-19 pandemic—are really *social* issues that are widely shared by others living in a similar time and place as us.

The sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the phrase "the sociological imagination" in a 1959 book. Mills' own research and writings ranged widely across American society in the 1950s and early 1960s, before he died from a heart attack at the age of 45.

The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), who coined the term in 1959, wrote that "the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills 1959:6). To understand the world around us, and to begin to think in a deep way about how it works and how we might improve it, is to recognize the extent to which our individual lives are strongly shaped by where, when, and to whom we were born, and the range of experiences we have had as a child, as an adolescent, and later as an adult. At each stage, we are both individuals and members of social worlds. Our opportunities and potentials are always influenced by the inequalities and injustices we encounter, but understanding these requires that we think about them sociologically. In short, the sociological imagination helps us to ask hard questions and seek answers about the social worlds we inhabit. Used wisely, it will also provide tools to navigate those worlds more effectively in pursuit of the goals we have set for ourselves.

## Looking at the Social World Through a Sociological Lens

**1.1.1** Discuss how a sociological imagination helps to challenge stereotypes.

A sociological imagination challenges some very basic impulses all of us have. To simplify a complex world, we often take for granted that things around us are somehow inevitable or natural. Those who grew up in a social context where marriage is defined as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman might be quick to conclude that such an arrangement was the way that intimate relationships were meant to be, that marriage is the "natural"

way for households to form. But if we look at different societies or our own over time, we will soon learn that marriage is only *sometimes* a lifetime commitment between a man and a woman, that many marriages will end in divorce, and that intimate relationships can last a lifetime *without* marriage. Further, intimate relationships may be between two men, or two women, or among varying romantic partners. Traditional ideas about appropriate marriage partners having similar racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds are rapidly disappearing. Indeed, the new freedom in defining relationships is one of the major social changes of the last 50 years. A sociological imagination helps us to understand that there is no single or "natural" model of marriage or intimacy.

In a similar fashion, we are also often quick to identify differences across groups of people—men and women, rich and poor, Whites and other races, people of different religions—as inherent characteristics of the members of these groups. But this assumption—that "group" characteristics



Many people assume that overweight people have caused their own weight problems by overeating and under-exercising. But sociologists studying obesity have pointed to many social factors that contribute to many people gaining weight. These factors include increasingly sedentary lifestyles centered on office jobs and leisure activities (such as watching TV or doing social media), the rise of the fast food industry, the increasing proportion of processed foods in the modern diet, and suburbanization and reliance on the automobile to get around instead of walking, among others.

apply to all members of the group or to any one individual—is always incorrect. No group contains members who are identical. Making faulty generalizations about individuals based on what we think we know about the groups they are members of is what is known as a **stereotype**. Yet it is very common. For instance, some people (and evidently many employers) think that older people are not as good workers as younger people. It *is* true that at some point, if we live long enough, we will become too old to perform jobs that we may have done for many years. But that does not mean that any specific person is incapable of doing a job because of their age. In fact, older workers may have wisdom and experience lacking in their younger colleagues.

A sociological imagination challenges such assumptions by raising questions about where stereotypes come from, what they are based on, and who stands to benefit from them. Sociology gives us tools to understand and think critically and creatively about everyday assumptions (such as stereotyped thinking) that others hold. It shows us that the things we often take for granted, or hear about in the media, are actually a lot more complicated than they appear. Seeing the social world in all its complexity is a challenge, but possessed of a sociological imagination we gain tools to be more active and effective participants in that world.

## Engaging Our Sociological Imaginations: From Personal Puzzles to Sociological Questions

**1.1.2** Explain the process for forming sociological questions.

*Everyone* possesses some elements of a sociological imagination. Sometimes we glide through life without thinking very hard about what is going on around us. But when we observe and reflect on the social worlds we experience, we are beginning to think sociologically. However, just observing the world around us does not necessarily mean we are fully engaging our sociological imaginations. It is only when we start to ask deeper and more meaningful questions about those worlds that our sociological imagination is fully active. *Our ability to ask hard questions, instead of just settling for easily available answers (or stereotypes), is the hallmark of a good sociological imagination.*

Where do sociological questions come from? Most professional sociologists, including many of the authors of this book, have had experiences in their lives, before they began doing sociological research, that ignited their sociological imaginations. For some it was triggered by a particular event, while for others it may have developed more slowly—a combination of things that inspired them to seek to develop this way of thinking. The short author biographies that appear at the beginning of each chapter give you some idea of the events that led the authors of this book to become sociologists. But you don't have to be a professional sociologist to develop your sociological imagination or ask sociological questions! One situation that often triggers our sociological imagination occurs when we see that something we have long taken for granted may be incorrect. That can happen at any moment, but when it does, and when we start to question our previous assumptions, we are taking the first step toward developing a sociological imagination.

Of course, we can also actively engage our sociological imaginations, rather than waiting for surprising puzzles or events (like COVID-19) to appear. One way is to think critically about "common sense." Common sense ideas are often very useful. For example, there are innumerable pearls of wisdom found in common sense *aphorisms*, short phrases stating a truth or opinion. Examples of aphorisms include "look before you leap," "a rising tide lifts all boats," "birds of a feather flock together," and so forth. We've all heard some of these phrases, and in many cases it is valuable to follow the wisdom they suggest. Standing at a busy intersection, we *should* look carefully before walking out in front of traffic. It is usually easier to make friends with someone when you have common interests. In such cases, common sense provides a useful guide to being human.

But if we look more closely, we quickly notice there is a problem. Almost every common sense aphorism only makes sense only in some contexts, but not others (Watts 2011). In fact, most aphorisms have an equally plausible, but entirely opposite, aphorism. For example, compare "look before you leap" to "they who hesitate are lost." They provide the exact opposite advice! That is, in some situations, it is important to seize opportunities before they disappear, while in other cases careful diligence is recommended. So which is correct? They cannot both be right all of the time. The answer is that it depends on the context. We have to know *which* common sense rule to apply in which social context if we are to be competent at being human.

Once we start learning not to take stereotypes and common sense ideas for granted, we can begin to ask questions about the world we inhabit. But what are these questions? Reading this book will open up many issues and questions to think about. But for now, here are a few examples. Think about eating at a school cafeteria. Maybe you just want to enjoy your food and your friends. But if you look around, if your school is like most in America, you may notice that there are relatively few, if any, groups that include both Whites and Blacks. Or visit a bunch of churches; you will rarely find large numbers of Blacks and Whites worshipping together. Why is it that, many decades after major civil rights legislation has ended legal discrimination, school friendship networks and religious worship so rarely cross the racial divide?

Or think about the United States. Why is it that one of the richest countries in the world has so many people living in poverty—far more, in fact, than other wealthy countries? (Using the official definition of poverty developed by the U.S. government, about 10–15% of all American families are poor at any given time.) An assumption many people have is that, at some level, poor people are lazy and disinclined to work hard. Yet as we will explore in more detail later in the book, many poor people work long hours but make very little money, not enough to lift them and their children out of poverty. Further, there are never enough jobs for everyone who wants one, meaning that there will always be some people left without the opportunity to work.

Differences across regions highlights another way in which poverty is produced by factors beyond those at the individual level. No matter how hard someone works in a very poor country, it is extremely unlikely that they will rise into what people living in rich countries would consider a middle-class living standard. Here's a simple example. Even in a rich country like the United States, there is considerable variation in how rich and poor you are likely to be depending on where you live. Some places in America have very few families living in poverty, while others have very high rates of poverty. Why is poverty so unevenly distributed? (See Figure 1.1 to see how many families in different parts of the United States are living in poverty and eligible to receive food stamps [formally known as the

"Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program"]). You are more likely to be poor living in some places than others. There are many other puzzles about poverty that present themselves once we start questioning the belief that anyone who is poor brought their condition upon themselves.

Asking questions about things we have previously taken for granted is a great foundation for getting involved in making social change. Those who accept the world as it is, and don't question how and why it might be different, will never feel compelled to get involved in trying to improve things. But once we start asking hard questions and searching for answers, we transition from passive to active citizens. Of course, seeking change can be threatening to people in positions of power. Governments, in particular, do not like it when their citizens begin to ask questions about topics that officials would prefer to keep secret, such as secret military operations or corruption among leading government figures. Similarly, large corporations or other organizations also may not like it when their workers start to challenge management's authority rather than simply do what they are told. School administrators often do not like it when students, parents, or outside observers raise questions about the character and quality of student learning or teaching. Even challenging family members at the dinner table about their own stereotypes can lead to puzzled looks or strong words. Sociological knowledge challenges the status quo, and those who benefit from it may not enjoy such challenges.

**Figure 1.1** Food Stamp Usage in the United States

**Percent of Households Receiving Supplemental Nutritional Aid Program (SNAP) Benefits, 2019**
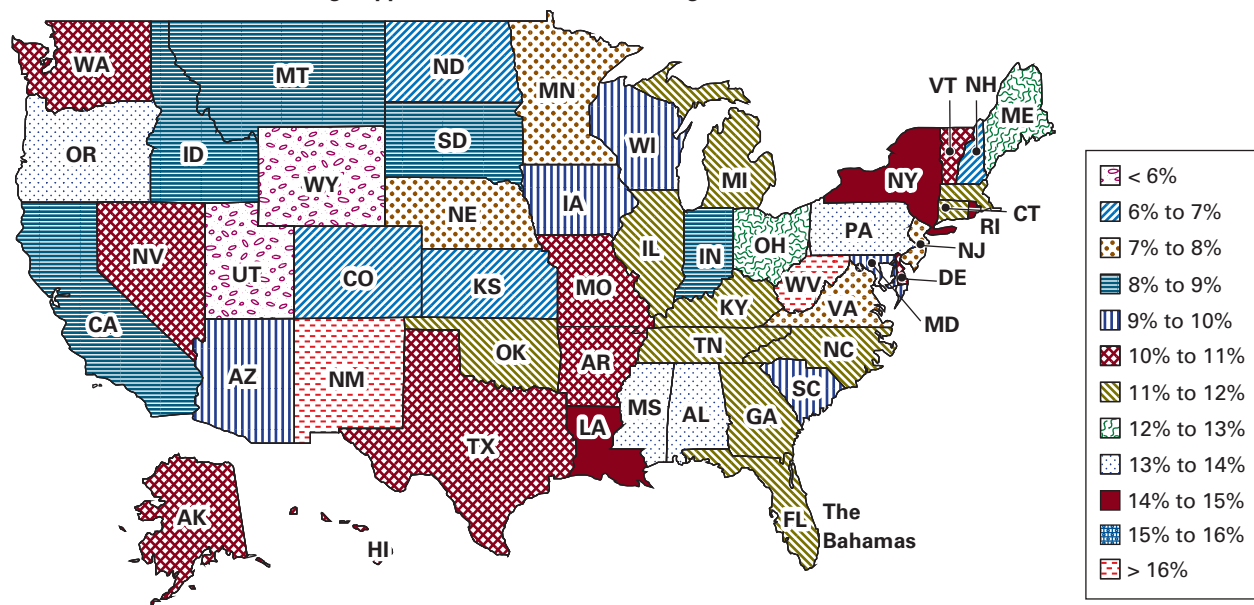


**SOURCE:** ACS 1-year estimates (2019) provided by SocialExplorer.com.

# Sociological Questions: A Detailed Example

**1.1.3 Identify the types of questions that sociologists are particularly well equipped to explore.**

To get a better sense of how sociologists use questions to craft research projects, let's consider in more detail a recent research project undertaken by Richard Arum, one of the authors of this chapter (and a topic of interest to many of the readers of this book). Arum had taught at several universities around the country, and was puzzled by what he perceived to be the relatively modest amount of student learning that was actually going on at these universities. We usually take for granted that colleges and universities are places where teaching and learning are prioritized, but Arum, the sociologist, began to question this premise. To investigate how much learning is going on in higher education, he and a collaborator carried out a project following more than 2,000 young adults as they progressed through 24 diverse colleges and universities, and then as they left college to work, live with friends, move in with romantic partners, or return to live with their parents (Arum and Roksa 2011, 2014). The students in the study had quite different college experiences and fared very differently in terms of learning outcomes. Some of these students were in college settings where they were exposed to challenging coursework and successfully moved into well-paying jobs immediately following graduation. Yet many more students did not enjoy such fates. In fact, two years out of college, a full quarter of recent college graduates were back living at home with their parents or relatives.

Consider two of the students tracked in the project: Maria and Robert. Maria attended a highly selective, residential liberal arts college in a small Midwestern town. She had come to college with a high SAT score and three high school Advanced Placement course credits. In college, she quickly decided on becoming a social science major after taking a small first-year seminar with a sociologist who did her research on urban youth culture. She spent a semester of her junior year abroad in Europe, and during her semesters at college she reported that she met frequently with her instructors outside of class to discuss her work and that faculty at the school had high expectations for students like her. She also reported that her classmates—many of whom she had come to know well as the college had integrated her academic program with her residential dorm—were equally encouraging of her focus on academic work. On average, she estimated devoting 20 hours per week preparing for classes, many of which had significant reading and writing requirements in her social science major. When her performance on tasks that required critical

thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication was measured, her scores moved up dramatically from freshman to senior year. Two years out of college, she was living with a friend she had met in college and was working at a job where she made slightly more than $40,000 per year. Although she had assumed a great deal of student debt, she was on a path to adult success.

Contrast Maria's college experiences with Robert's. Robert attended a high school that was predominantly non-White before enrolling in a nonselective, large public university in his state that is known as something of a "party school." Like many of his classmates, he entered college without any Advanced Placement coursework completed, and he did not score particularly well on the SAT. In college, he reported rarely meeting with his instructors outside of class. When asked about whether faculty had high expectations for students like him, he reported that they largely did not. He muddled through coursework with passing grades but did not find his coursework either interesting or challenging. Instead, he found himself increasingly focused on socializing with his friends and earning spending money to support social activities outside of school. Like many of his peers, he studied about eight hours per week in college; when he did prepare for his classes, he often did so in group settings with his friends, who ended up often distracting him from really focusing on his work. During his senior year, when he was tested on the same tasks that Maria completed, there was no improvement in his performance—even after attending college for four years! Sadly, Robert was not alone. Arum and Roksa found that slightly more than a third of students in their study demonstrated no meaningful improvement on a test of general skills. And Robert was not rewarded in the labor market when he graduated in 2009. Two years after graduation, he was about $30,000 in debt, unemployed, and living back at home with his parents. About the only thing he had in common with Maria was a heavy debt load and a college degree.

Unfortunately, Maria's relatively smooth trajectory from college to well-paying job has not been true for most college graduates. Far more are struggling like Robert. The context has changed: 20 or 30 years ago, recent college graduates were finding more immediate opportunities in the labor market in jobs where their degree was required than in recent years. In the long run, having a college degree still pays off in much higher lifetime earnings, and eventually it is likely that Robert will be able to use his college degree to find his way but the context in which college graduates are entering the world of work is not as easy as it has been in the past. Many start out working at jobs that do not require a college degree and don't pay very well (see Figure 1.2).

How can we understand why Maria and Robert had such different college experiences and ended up on such different postcollege paths? There are many ways in

**Figure 1.2** Employment Status of Recent College Graduates
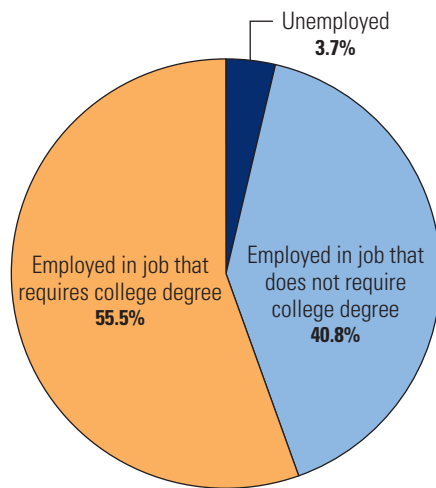


**NOTE:** Rates are from January 2020. Recent college graduates are those aged 22 to 27 with a bachelor's degree or higher.

**SOURCE:** Federal Reserve Bank of New York, "The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates," 2020. https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market/index.html

which the ideas and research of sociologists give us the tools to understand how Maria's and Robert's lives are unfolding the way they are. The common sense answer is simply that Maria just worked harder than Robert. And there appears to be some truth in that. But that is not likely the entire story. A sociological view of student experiences in high school and college poses a range of questions about how individuals (like Maria and Robert) and institutions interact in complex ways. For example, Maria's high school experience probably better trained her in how to study and helped her develop the discipline required to do well in her courses in college. Maria also seems to have gotten more support and mentoring along the way; perhaps this is just because she demanded it, but more likely her schools made it easier for her to find mentors and advisors, while Robert's high school failed in this critical mission. Instead of focusing on Maria's and Robert's individual differences, we might ask: How did Maria's educational background help prepare her for college, and how did Robert's handicap him?

There are also interesting questions we might ask from a societal perspective—after all, public high schools and colleges, and even private colleges, are subsidized by all taxpayers. Why is it that Robert (and others like him) are spending less time on their studies than students did a generation ago, but still earn passing grades? Have standards and expectations fallen across the board, and if so, why? Why do some schools become known as "party schools," and what are the consequences for students attending those schools? How has the nature of campus life changed in the past few decades? Are students more or less likely to join organizations or to interact with each other collectively

during their college years than at other points in their life? We could also ask these questions in a comparative context: Is the United States alone in these changes in higher education, or are there global shifts underway that are altering the meaning and experience of college across national borders?

As this example suggests, to fully grasp the meaning and outcomes of Maria's and Robert's college experiences using a sociological imagination, we need to take a step back and consider the contexts of their respective experiences. Rather than just patting Maria on the back while frowning on Robert for their respective college outcomes, we might think about the different ways in which they were each prepared to enter college. Sociological questions are concerned with a broad canvas of the modern world. They range widely from the basic units of human life—such as individuals' relationships with others—to the groups and organizations we are a part of, all the way up to a rapidly changing global economy that is impacting all of our social relationships.

As we move through the book, we will be introducing big questions concerning many of the most important topics sociologists are currently examining. But our first big point is this: Learning how to ask the important questions, and to think hard about how to probe for answers, is the heart of the sociological imagination.

# The Endless Reach of the Sociological Imagination

**1.1.4** Discuss the wide range of topics and areas of life that sociologists study.

Very few aspects of the social world *cannot* be studied sociologically. Consider a few of the different areas that some of the sociologists involved with *The Sociology Project* have examined in their own research:

- Harvey Molotch wrote a book about the sociology of the toilet, and another book about how common household products are first invented.
- Eric Klinenberg wrote a book on why so many people died in certain neighborhoods in Chicago during a heat wave in 1995.
- Ann Morning wrote a book about the social construction of racial classification schemes in biology and anthropology, showing how these schemes have changed numerous times and can never really be defined once and for all, even by so-called experts.
- Kathleen Gerson wrote a book about the conflicting relationship expectations of young men and women in the twenty-first century.
- Jeff Goodwin wrote a book about how and why revolutions occurred in some places, but not others.
- Steven Lukes wrote a book on how sociological ideas can better inform complex moral debates.

- Lynne Haney wrote a book exploring how mothers in prison raise small children while simultaneously serving time.
- Colin Jerolmack wrote a book about the relationship between humans and pigeons across the world.
- Paula England has written a number of papers on how the "hook-up" culture has changed the meaning and consequences of sexual activity among young adults.
- Jeff Manza wrote a book on how the rise of mass incarceration is undermining democratic elections in the United States.

We could mention many others. The point is that the reach of the sociological imagination is nearly endless and can be employed to explore almost any aspect of the human condition. But doing so requires a specific set of research tools and theoretical knowledge to begin seeking answers. In recent decades, methodological advances and the appearance of ever more information about human behavior (in the era of the internet and social media) has made it possible to study new topics or old topics in new ways. But there is one unifying theme. All of the questions sociologists ask build off a common starting point: How and in what ways do *social contexts* matter? We explore this in more detail in the next section.



Claudio Gallone/Avalon Licensing

**BIG QUESTION 1.2** What Are Social Contexts, and Why Do They Matter?

## SOCIAL CONTEXTS: FROM INDIVIDUALS TO SOCIETIES

Sociology is fundamentally concerned with how individuals participate in, and are influenced by, the society in which they live. The stories of college students Maria and Robert provide one example. We refer to this influence of society on individuals as the **social context**. What do we mean when we refer to it?

One way of thinking about the diverse kinds of contexts individuals face is through the following thought experiment. Imagine being in the maternity ward of a large hospital, looking at a group of newborn babies (see the photo above). They are all helpless and adorable, with a full life ahead of them. In a perfect world, they would all have an equal opportunity to develop their many talents and abilities and succeed in life. In fact, we might look at those cute little creatures and think to ourselves, "Any one of these babies could one day be the president of the United States." But we also know that it is likely these babies will vary widely in their achievements and outcomes in life. Some will have a much easier path in life than others. Why?

At its core, the sociological imagination is the idea that individual lives unfold in contexts—in this case, social environments, including economic and cultural conditions, in which each of these infants will grow up and live. And those contexts are going to be very different for some babies than others. We don't know, looking at the babies in the cribs, which ones will have strong family support and encouragement growing up, or be able to attend good schools and afford to college, and if so, find mentors in college who can help guide them to a career pathway, or gain access to a good job and life opportunities as an adult. To be sure, if we did know something about the contexts in which each of these infants will grow up, we would be able to make much better-educated guesses about their prospects in life. So what are these contexts? We can immediately identify a variety of factors that are going to influence each baby's life:

- The child's immediate family (past and present), most importantly their parents' education level, wealth, and income

- The neighborhood and community the child will grow up in (and will live in as an adult)
- The education the child will get (including the quality of the schools they will attend)
- The types of organizations (churches, clubs, or groups) they will join or have access to
- The type of employment they will find

There are also other, broader contexts that each of these babies is born into that are important to keep in mind, such as

- the country and region they are born into (for example, a rich or poor country, a racist or sexist place or one that has taken measures to give everyone full citizenship), and
- the period of history into which they are born.

Each cute little baby will, in fact, enter social worlds that will have a huge impact on where they end up. Later in the book, we will explore each of these in more detail. For now, however, let's briefly consider some of these different contexts in more detail.

## Families and Communities

**1.2.1** **Analyze how families and communities shape the social development of children.**

We are born into families, and generations of sociological research have stressed the importance of family situations as a key to understanding how individuals develop. Our families shape who we are in a variety of ways: by giving us racial, ethnic, and religious identities; by teaching us the basic rules of society and how to behave in society or in particular social settings; by exposing us to certain networks of people; by providing the financial resources that our caregivers invest in our education and development, as well as the emotional and cognitive capacities they have developed in us through lifelong interactions; and (possibly) through the extent to which they are willing and able to help out later in life as we become adults and perhaps even attempt to raise a new generation of children of our own (such as helping buy cars or houses or pay for weddings).

This brings a second important context into view: the neighborhood and community in which we grow up. Living in a safe neighborhood with good schools, surrounded by families who encourage their children to do well and to be ambitious and confident, creates a different set of pathways than that experienced by a child living in an impoverished, high-crime neighborhood with poor schools. The latter environment can have many negative consequences, including not just obvious things like the continual risk of being a criminal victim and the lack of people who can provide positive role models and social networks helpful for finding jobs, but also more subtle

things like increased stress levels that come from living in such environments, as well as reduced sleep, elevated levels of anxiety, all of which have been shown to hinder school performance (Santiago et al. 2011).

For instance, New York University sociologist Pat Sharkey discovered a link between neighborhood violence and children's school performance (Sharkey 2010, 2019). He discovered that within the week following a homicide in their neighborhood, children in Chicago scored significantly lower on reading and vocabulary tests than they had in the week prior to the homicide. Among other things, Sharkey's research teaches us how violence can be absorbed by and transmitted through neighborhood contexts—and how children, who are perhaps the most vulnerable to such exposure, experience their effects at school as well as home. Aside from our collective interest in reducing violent crime, Sharkey's research also suggests we need to also think about the (usually hidden) consequences of neighborhood violence on innocent children.

## Identities and Groups

**1.2.2** **Explain how our identities impact our opportunities in life.**

Our **identities**—the conceptions we and others have about who we are and what groups or categories we are members of—provide another important type of social context in which individual lives unfold. We are born with certain physical attributes—most notably the color of our skin and our biological sex (although one or both may be ambiguous) and possibly a disability or an unusual physical characteristic (such as our height or weight). Our family also automatically imposes upon us other identities before we are old enough to play any role in choosing them ourselves, for example, religion, ethnicity, and the place or region we grow up in. As we move through life, we may be able to change some of these identities, and we often pick up new ones. Some identities are frozen; others can be shed or re-made over time.

However we acquire these identities, they are critical factors in predicting where we end up in life, the kinds of opportunities we have, and how the rest of the world views us. Some identities may be benign or neutral, and some may be positive or beneficial. Others may be a minor negative factor, while some can be a severe disadvantage that is difficult to overcome. For example, in virtually all societies that have ever been studied, men have more status and power than women; having the identity of "male" or "man" has historically conferred important advantages. Similarly, around the world today, members of dominant racial and ethnic groups have more opportunities and collect more rewards than members of other groups. Those living in the United States today

may be especially aware of these divides and inequalities, but it is important to note that some version of them is found in virtually all societies. Yet just because they are universal does not mean we should accept or believe social hierarchies are fair and proper. Just because human societies almost always produce them, and those who benefit from them will struggle to maintain them, does not mean they are unchangeable.

## Schools and Organizations

**1.2.3 Discuss how the schools and organizations we participate in shape our lives and identities.**

From the families we are raised in to the neighborhoods where we grow up, to the identities we have or adopt, the schools we attend and the organizations we join mark us in further important ways. Education is such an important element of our development into adulthood that it is hardly surprising that the quality and types of schools we attend will have a huge impact on our lives. What is more important is the ways in which the specific schools we attend convey a great deal about us to employers, friends and colleagues, and new people we meet.

The same thing is true of identities we form from the work we do and other organizational connections we forge: the churches, synagogues, or mosques we attend; the unions or professional associations we join as adults; how and where we volunteer; the clubs and civic or political groups in which we choose to participate in. All of these organizations provide potential contexts to gain important types of experience and insights, and/or find opportunities. Our membership in these organizations also associates us with a certain identity. Many may be positive associations, and some may even be more meaningful than other identities. There are, however, some organizations where membership can leave lasting negative marks that cannot easily be removed, such as becoming a prison inmate.



Getting involved in a church or other religious organization is one way in which people meet each other and form communities and social networks.

## Social, Economic, and Historical Contexts

**1.2.4 Analyze the ways in which the social and economic context we are born into shapes the opportunities available to us.**

C. Wright Mills emphasized that the sociological imagination involves continual reflection on the connection between individual biography and historical context. What exactly does that mean? For one thing, the social, economic, and historical contexts we are born into matter enormously for what is possible for us to achieve and do. For example, a Black male born in the South in 1900 (during the era of Jim Crow, in which laws and opportunities in the South were explicitly designed to privilege Whites) faced a very different environment and very different opportunities than the same male born today, simply by virtue of the time and place he was alive. A child growing up in a working-class family in Detroit in the 1940s—when the automobile industry was booming and the city was home to a large number of well-paying working-class jobs—had a different set of economic opportunities than the same child growing up in contemporary Detroit (where in recent years the area has been hard hit by a devastating decline in manufacturing jobs, and unemployment among people without college degrees is very high). Women entering adulthood in the 1950s faced a different set of choices and cultural expectations than women entering adulthood since the gender revolution of the 1970s, when occupations and opportunities historically closed to women opened up and the ideal (if not always the reality) of egalitarian marriage began to develop. The historical contexts of our lives are often critical, and they change over time.

Finally, all of these contexts are influenced by a global environment. We live in an era where events in regions and countries around the world can influence us wherever we are located; in other words, what happens in one place can shape what happens in other places. For example, many types of jobs once done in the United States are now performed by workers in other countries, who will do those jobs for less pay. At the same time, individuals today have more opportunities than ever before to explore life in other places. Virtually every college has a study abroad program, where students can experience living elsewhere for a semester or a year. Individuals can also choose to move to another country and make a life there—there are some limits on this, but almost every country in the world has communities of immigrants, people who were raised in one country but now live in another. As jobs, ideas, and technology move around the globe at an unprecedented pace, it is increasingly clear that we are connected to people and places far away.

When people patiently stand in line, in an orderly fashion, they are obeying social norms that promote efficiency and fairness (i.e., "wait your turn"). Usually there is no authority figure who can enforce the norms; people just usually obey, and if they didn't, a chaotic situation would result.



Meeting other people involves a complicated set of social norms that can vary depending on cultural practices, the type of situation, and other factors. Handshaking is one way people commonly greet each other; however, there are different kinds of possible handshakes. We take social cues to know which handshake is appropriate.

## Sociology as the Study of Social Contexts

**1.2.5** **Explain the distinction between social interaction and social structure.**

Having introduced the critical idea of social contexts, we can now define sociology more fully and clearly: Sociology is the study of the diverse contexts within which individuals' lives unfold, how individuals navigate those contexts and, sometimes, when and how they contribute to changing them. More specifically, our social worlds have two central components: social interaction and social structure. **Social interaction** refers to the way people act together, including how they modify and alter their behavior in response to the presence of others. Social interaction is governed by a set of **norms**, which are the basic rules of society that help us know what is and is not appropriate to do in any situation. As we interact with others, we engage in a process of working within those rules and norms to try to present a pleasing version of ourselves to others. Examples include our social media and professional website profiles, our business cards, and the different ways we characterize ourselves in social settings when we meet new people or introduce ourselves to a group. For example, the authors of this chapter are sometimes sociologists, sometimes professors and teachers, sometimes parents, sometimes politically active citizens, and sometimes various other things depending on the situation. We always occupy the same body, but who exactly we are (or how we characterize ourselves) depends on our social contexts and how we or others characterize us.

The importance of the "social" part of social interaction becomes most clear to us when we violate societal rules of acceptable behavior (or when we imagine the social sanctions that would follow if we did violate the rules). Consider this example: What would happen if a student in a college classroom were to suddenly stand up on their desk and

shout profanities at the instructor or fellow students? Even if some students might occasionally feel like doing this, there are powerful constraints that discourage such action. Without anyone saying anything, it is understood that if we did this, our classmates might shun us; the instructor might lower our grade or, perhaps, call campus security to escort us out of the class. So even when we are annoyed or frustrated or bored in class, or in similar situations (like being in seemingly endless meetings or standing in long lines), we generally know to keep our true feelings to ourselves.

But even if you think there is no chance of any significant consequences, you still know when certain behaviors are regarded as wrong or inappropriate. How? Sociologists argue that we continually censor ourselves because of our concern for the social consequences of our action. We learn and absorb societal norms from our interactions with important others (such as parents, friends, teachers, ministers, or mentors). Knowing the norms, and rules for (if any) in any situation is important for avoiding embarrassment and acting appropriately in different contexts. Most of the time, we just want to "fit in" wherever we find ourselves, but in order to do so, we have to know what is expected of us.

Where do these norms and rules that govern social interaction come from, and why do they persist over time? Part of the reason is simply that people just do what is expected and, in the process, reinforce and reproduce those rules (or, sometimes, subtly begin to change them). But there is more to it than that. Sociologists use the concept of **social structure** to describe the many diverse ways in which the rules and norms of everyday life come together to form enduring patterns that shape and govern social interactions. Social structure, in this sense, lies in the background of every social interaction. Social structure is a messy but essential concept, one we explore in more detail in Chapter 5 and elsewhere throughout the book.

There are two critical components of social structure. First, every society has a complex set of roles and **social hierarchies**, the social positions that both define our relationships with each other, while also giving some individuals and groups higher status and more power than others. Whatever role or position we occupy in any interaction—student, child, parent, leader of a group, member of a group, and so on—our actions, and indeed our range of options for action, are impacted by the rules and powers that are associated with it. For example, the child is supposed to defer to the parent, the worker to the business owner, and the patient to the doctor.

The second aspect of social structure comprises the norms and **institutions** of society. The concept of institutions is one of the most difficult in the language of sociology, and we will encounter it repeatedly throughout the book, again, especially in Chapter 5. Institutions are longstanding and socially important practices (like marriage, families, education, and economic markets), and organizations that govern those practices. The simple point is this: Every society creates institutions that guide the development and behavior of all members of that society. These two aspects of social structure—roles/hierarchies and norms/institutions—provide the essential frameworks for almost everything we do in our daily lives, including our interactions with others. Although they are distinct, there is a critical point to keep in mind, that we will return to throughout the book: Social structure and social interaction inform each other. It is through our social interactions that we reinforce (or occasionally challenge) norms and institutions, and those norms and institutions in turn shape and guide our interactions with others. We act, *and* we are acted upon.

In spite of their importance, social structures are rarely obvious to us unless we know where to look. Because they lie in the background of our experience, we may not necessarily notice our society's hierarchies and institutions. In many cases, social structures become most visible when they limit our freedom in some way. Sometimes the rules, customs, laws, and regulations of society can prevent us from doing something we otherwise might do if we were completely free of all social structures. Imagine if there were no laws or norms against cheating in college. At first, that might seem like a new kind of freedom has been granted. It's probably not too hard to guess that there would be vastly more cheating than there is today. But there are problems. Suddenly everyone's performance (cheaters as well as honest students) would quickly become suspect. Employers and graduate schools would have no good way of trusting students' grades. The value of college education might begin to erode. Sometimes, too much freedom can lead to unsatisfactory outcomes!



Mark Bussell

Where Did Sociology Come From, and How Is It Different from Other Social Sciences?

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

We can apply the sociological imagination to study many topics, including even sociology itself! If we were to undertake the sociological study of sociology, we would need to ask questions such as the following: In what social contexts did sociology begin to develop? How does sociology fit into, and relate to, the other social sciences? How is research conducted by sociologists different from research in other social sciences? Why and when is sociological knowledge thought to be valuable by ordinary people, people involved in trying to bring about social change, or even the people in positions of power who decide what kinds of knowledge should be obtained by citizens? And, of course, one last question that students

(or their tuition-paying parents) would need to ask: What exactly can someone *do* with sociological knowledge? In this section, we explore these questions.

## The Birth of Sociology

**1.3.1** **Discuss the origins of sociology as a discipline.**

Scholars and ordinary people have puzzled about their social worlds for as long as humans have lived in settled communities. Early on, religious and philosophical thinkers dominated discussions about the social world, but most of their conversations focused on abstract debates (such as, "Is slavery wrong or immoral") and **anecdotes** (singular stories about incidents or people). Sociology, as well other social sciences, really began to develop when growing numbers of people started to turn from focusing on these abstract debates to wanting to know more systematically and more specifically about how things actually work in the real world. Perhaps if some of the religious and philosophical defenders of slavery in the nineteenth century had visited some slave plantations and interviewed enslaved people about their condition, or even better spent a few weeks living as a slave, rather than relying on anecdotes they received from other people, they might have been compelled to reach somewhat different conclusions about the morality of slavery. In other words, the desire to answer hard questions about the human experience with systematic information, or what is known as **data**, is at the center of the modern sociological enterprise.

The development of this new way of questioning and seeking answers to issues and problems of the modern world unfolded in fits and starts throughout the Middle Ages and into the nineteenth century, but the idea that the social world could be studied with rigor and scientific methods akin to those that had been applied to the natural world began to take hold from the 1880s onward. Key early thinkers who contributed ideas that were very influential in the development of sociology and social theory were at work long before that, (some of which are covered in more detail in Chapter 2) including Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), Adam Smith (1723–1790), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), Karl Marx (1818–1883), and Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). But these key thinkers would not have thought of themselves as sociologists (as there really was no such thing at the time). And in spite of their often extraordinary insights, they did not have access to any of the kinds of data and other information available to modern social scientists to permit them to reach more careful conclusions.

The term *sociology* was first used by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), in 1839. Interestingly, Comte thought that sociology would eventually become the ultimate science of social life, with other disciplines contributing pieces of knowledge, while sociology would integrate those pieces into a coherent science of society. Comte envisioned that sociological science would entail both what he called "social statics" (the study of societies as they are) and "social dynamics" (the processes of social change) (Comte [1839–1853] 2009).

As the nineteenth century wore on, a variety of new ways of studying the social world began to emerge, just as Comte predicted. Between 1880 and 1910, the social sciences started to settle down into organized bodies of knowledge and develop distinctive disciplinary profiles. For sociology, this settling down first occurred in Europe—primarily in France and Germany, the latter of which had the best universities in the world at the time. Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) founded the first European sociology department at the University of Bordeaux in 1895, as well as the first major European journal of sociology (*L'Annee Sociologique*) in 1898. In Germany, a group of early sociologists—among them Max Weber (1864–1920)—created an influential journal called the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (*Archives for Social Science*



*Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo*

The Chicago School of Sociology (based at the University of Chicago) developed many important ideas about society based on detailed studies in the city of Chicago (shown here in an image from the 1890s). It is apparent from this historic photo that the city faced problems related to overcrowding and sanitation during that time period. Such issues helped give impetus to the creation of sociology in the first place.

*and Social Welfare*), establishing an identity for sociology as a discipline in that country.

On the other side of the Atlantic, a distinctively American tradition of sociology also emerged around the same time, initially centered at the University of Chicago, where the first sociology department in America was founded in 1895. Frequently taking the city of Chicago as its laboratory, the so-called **Chicago School** intensively studied the problems of cities and the groups of people living in them, developing a body of knowledge that remains influential to this day.

It is worth noting that in both Europe and the United States, the early professional social scientists were almost all White men. Sociologists like W. E. B. Du Bois (1869–1963) and Jane Addams (1860–1935), although recognized both at the time and today for their genius and their social, intellectual, and political contributions, were not offered the kinds of academic appointments given to their White, male peers. Instead of just doing research, DuBois and Addams developed careers combining research and social activism. They, and a small handful of other pioneering sociologists, placed inequalities of race and gender squarely on the emerging agenda of sociology. The intellectual growth of the field in recent decades owes much to the recovery and expansion of the insights of a more diverse group of scholars.

By the 1920s, sociology had become an increasingly popular field of study for college students and was recognized for its distinctive way of understanding and researching social life. Sociology had emerged as one of the five major social sciences (alongside economics, political science, psychology, and anthropology). Today, as we noted earlier in the chapter, sociologists are engaged in the study of many key societal issues and controversies, working from universities as well as inside government agencies, in nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations, and in policy and political advocacy groups.

## Sociology and the Industrial Revolution

**1.3.2** Explain the roles of industrialization and urbanization in the development of sociology.

So far, our very brief sketch has focused on early sociological ideas and the thinkers who began to formulate them. While some key thinkers such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber helped to create a new body of sociological knowledge, the existence of great thinkers and schools alone cannot explain what helps diverse ideas come together to create a disciplined body of knowledge. As with individual lives, so too does sociology have a "social context" that shaped its growth and development. Two critical developments spurred the social sciences in general and sociology in particular: the very rapid period of **industrialization** (the growth of factories

and large-scale goods production) and **urbanization** (the growth of cities) in the late nineteenth century in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. This was a period when new technologies and innovations made possible the growth of large-scale manufacturing of consumer products, transforming economies based primarily in agriculture to those based in the manufacturing of goods. This period of urbanization was marked by growth in the proportion of the population living in urban areas and cities, which grew rapidly in size between 1850 and 1920 in both Europe and the United States. Figure 1.3 illustrates the growth of cities and surrounding metropolitan areas in the United States during this period. The new job opportunities in rapidly growing factories pulled people away from farms and rural communities and provided economic opportunities for wave after wave of immigrants from other countries who arrived in steadily increasing numbers from the 1870s until the early 1920s.

The social changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization were immense. The contexts of both individual lives as well as whole communities were changing rapidly. The exploding cities that developed in the United States and Europe from the middle of the nineteenth century onward were teeming with **social problems** that were markedly different from the agricultural economies of previous centuries. To begin with, these cities were rife with high levels of poverty. Even though incomes were rising, the cost of living was relatively high compared to the farms and small towns of the nineteenth century. The pace of home construction was always behind the rapidly growing demand, pushing up rents and forcing families to live in small spaces or double up with others. Food costs were also higher. Further, the early factories often had difficult working conditions, and in the United States few workers were organized into unions which could have provided some protections.

The upshot of this period of exceptional expansion of industry and cities was that urban life was viewed by many as troubled. Cities were dirty places—this was largely before public health and public sanitation measures

**Figure 1.3** Growth of Urban Population in the United States
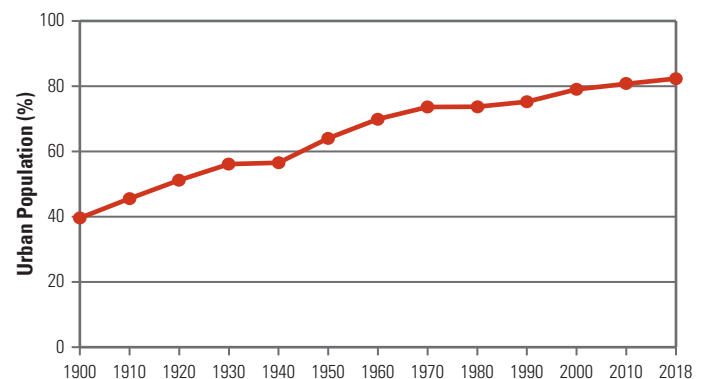
A view of the Park Avenue Armory in New York City. Constructed in the late 19th century, it was used to provide private military training to young upper-class men (an enormous central hall inside the facility was used to practice drills), who were members of a privately-funded militia. It also served as a warehouse for military equipment in the event the militia had to go into battle. It was paid for by New York City's rich to provide protection in the event of an uprising by the city's poor. That anyone thought such measures were necessary highlights just how pervasive fears of social revolution were in a period of rapid social change.

EQRoy/Shutterstock

had become widely implemented—and they were breeding grounds for disease, infant mortality, and early death. They were also places where crime and violence were much more common than in rural communities. Finally, and in a quite different vein, they were places where people could organize themselves to protest unpleasant conditions of life. Instead of tolerating misery alone on one's farm, now it was possible to meet and discuss problems with dozens or hundreds of people living in close proximity. These challenges threatened city rulers and economic elites, who even began creating their own private armies to repeal threats to their wealth.

In the face of these new conditions and challenges, sociology found its place as part of a broader effort to understand the sources of these emerging social challenges, and how they might be better addressed. Of course, sociology was not the only academic discipline to emerge from this period of social change; the other social sciences also appeared around the same time, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and all were developing alongside another important context—the modern research university. Research universities were schools that began to develop graduate degree programs in many fields, including sociology. There, young scholars could be trained to do research, rather than figure it out on their own (as their nineteenth century predecessors generally had to). As noted, the most famous training ground for young sociologists was at the University of Chicago, but other significant

sociology PhD programs emerged by the 1910s and 1920s at a number of other universities.

# Sociology's Siblings

**1.3.3** **Compare and contrast sociology with the other social sciences.**

While all the social sciences were born from a similar impulse, to understand the emerging social worlds spawned by industrialization and urban growth, there was considerable disagreement over where to go from that common starting point. So how did sociology come to differ from other social sciences? What is the nature of the sibling rivalry between them? We would point to two fundamental distinctions:

1. Sociology's concepts and theories cover a wider range of topics than other disciplines—sociologists are rather "promiscuous" in what they study.

2. Sociology's explanations of how the external world shapes behaviors of individuals and social outcomes are broader than those of other disciplines, and encompass different units of analysis. Sociologists move *from individuals to groups to institutions to nation-states to global society*. Sociology is the social science discipline that is most concerned about how different parts of society link up to and mutually influence one another.

Of course, the danger of having such a broad spectrum of topics to study is that it can be hard to define the parameters of the field. The authors of this chapter are often asked this question: What exactly *is* sociology? Even professional sociologists struggle to give a short, simple answer. Sociologists don't define themselves according to a specific arena of life, unlike other social scientists. Political scientists are primarily concerned with topics that involve governments and the policies they produce. Economists are mainly concerned with individuals' economic behavior (microeconomics) and the performance of the national (or global) economy (macroeconomics). Psychologists are interested in understanding the workings of the human brain. Anthropologists claim special expertise in the practices of diverse cultures and how they vary across time and place.

Because sociology cannot be categorized by a specific subject matter, it often moves into areas that are the "home turf" of the other social sciences. As our name indicates, sociologists claim scientific expertise over those parts of

life we call the "social," and in topics with social significance. But the "social" is a bit fuzzier of a topic and area of expertise than those studied by other disciplines. That is, most people can roughly grasp what a political scientist means when they study "government"—or what an economist does when researching "the economy." But sociologists often get perplexed looks when we say we study the "social world." It took one of our grandmothers 20 years to stop telling her friends that her granddaughter was a professor of "socialism" (rather than sociology). For her, this was a concrete way to make sense of the social and to translate it into something meaningful (and also a bit scary, as she was a staunch Republican!). So while sociologists' refusal to break up the world into small, narrow slices and proclaim expertise over them does cause confusion, most sociologists would have it no other way.

So how does the broad agenda of sociologists compare with other disciplines? Consider the difference between sociology and psychology. Psychology is centered on the study of the mind, the psyche, and the physical brain. Sociologists have much to learn from psychological findings, some of which we've already mentioned in this chapter (for example, psychologists invented the concept and have more deeply researched how and why humans so often rely on stereotypes). At the same time, sociologists part company with many traditional psychologists in insisting that individuals (and their minds and psyches) must also always be located in larger social contexts. For sociologists, it is not enough to explain individual behavior by simply understanding the intricacies of the psyche or the mental processes common to all humans. Because individuals are embedded in families and communities, as well as in cultural, economic, and political environments, sociologists view human behavior as caused by something more than just what individual brains tell us to do. To explain why individuals do what they do, in other words, social structures must also come into view.

A similar gap separates sociology from economics. Economists pride themselves on building and testing models of economic behavior using clear and simple assumptions about human nature. Their ideas, and the mathematical models of human behavior they develop, are often elegant and lead to clear predictions that can be tested by researchers. Sociologists, by contrast, tend to believe that for all of their impressive advances, economists sometimes miss important outcomes because they don't consider a wide enough range of factors and forces affecting human behavior. For example, when people engage in buying goods or services, they are not just influenced by getting the most value at a price they can afford. They are also influenced in their decisions by social norms, how much they trust the seller, fads or fashions that make the "value" of a good different than it might appear, and many other non-economic considerations. So while sociological theories tend to be messier and more difficult to

test than many economic theories, they can also produce a wider range of possible explanations that, when successful, can produce genuinely new understandings.

Sibling rivalry aside, most social scientists today end up drawing on the ideas and insights of other fields and disciplines as well as their own. After a century or so of building their own disciplines, bodies of knowledge, and professional associations, in recent years there has been a strong movement in the social sciences to blur the boundaries between the fields. **Interdisciplinary research**, as it is known, is an increasingly central part of learning about any topic in sociology or the social sciences. Few students and scholars in any social science would be foolish enough not to draw on ideas and research from neighboring social sciences. And sociology is perhaps the most likely to do this—it is unquestionably the most interdisciplinary of all the traditional social science disciplines. As a result, sociology has many subfields that reflect interdisciplinary connections: economic sociology, political sociology, social psychology, educational sociology, the sociology of public health, environmental sociology, and so forth. Depending on the question at hand, sociologists may need to know something about the research and theories developed by economists, political scientists, psychologists, or anthropologists (or sometimes more than one of these disciplines). Sociology also often draws on the work of historians—an area that is traditionally placed in the humanities but is increasingly closely related to the social sciences and sociology in particular. Although our main interest in this book is introducing you to sociological insights and approaches, we would certainly *not* want to leave the impression that sociology by itself has all the answers to all the questions that social scientists raise. It does not.

## Sociology's Children

**1.3.4** Identify some of the spin-off fields that originally started in sociology.

One interesting side note on the relationship between sociology and the other social sciences is the way in which sociology has helped to spawn a number of new areas of study. In most colleges today, there are a large number of spin-off majors and programs that largely began in sociology. This list includes such fields as criminology, gender studies, Black or African American studies, Latinx studies, LGBTQ studies, urban studies, rural studies, organizational or management studies, industrial relations or labor studies, demography, communication/media studies, and others. There was once a time when much of the research and scholarship on these topics was done within sociology. But for various reasons, these subfields eventually split off from sociology to become independent fields of study of their own (and develop their own bases of

knowledge). It is, indeed, quite remarkable just how many spin-off academic disciplines originally started (at least in part) in sociology, a record of innovation and intellectual diversity of which sociologists can be proud. Even today, there are exciting new areas of study in sociology that may eventually grow into disciplines of their own. At its core, however, sociology will remain a foundational discipline for many of these interdisciplinary social sciences. And in this sense, learning the basics of sociology is an essential foundation for any one of these newer fields.

# Conclusion: Looking Ahead

Our goal for this book is to provide our readers with the foundation for developing their own sociological imaginations. By understanding how individuals' lives are embedded in particular social contexts that are not always of their own choosing, as well as the role of social interaction and social structures, we hope that you will learn to appreciate how personal issues that individuals face are often larger societal problems. Our fondest hope is that our readers will go on to take other sociology courses. But even if this is your only experience with sociology, there are many take-away lessons for everyday life—learning how organizations work, how schools function, the tricks of social interaction, the cultural underpinning of inequality—that can arm readers with knowledge of the social world.

One of the unique aspects of *The Sociology Project* is that the authors of each of the chapters in this book are writing about the topics that they spend their lives researching and teaching. We believe that a collective approach to presenting the discipline of sociology provides a better way of unearthing and exciting our readers' sociological imaginations. In the course of thinking about (and teaching) the topics we are writing about, we have developed deep appreciation for the excitement of studying our respective topics that we hope to convey in the chapters that follow.

In order to create a unified text, we've taken a number of steps to make it easier to move from chapter to chapter. Each chapter opens with a puzzle or story about a sociological research project that highlights one or more of the key sociological problems that will be tackled in the chapter. Following this, each chapter identifies a set of big questions that have defined the research and teaching puzzles of the field. These questions organize what follows as the authors explore how sociological thinking about each question has developed. At all points, some basic facts and data are helpful to have in hand, but at the same time we want our readers to learn to think sociologically through learning how to ask hard questions, and where to look for answers.

In short, we want to stress that this book—and indeed sociology as a discipline—truly is a *project:* something we are collectively engaged in building and something for which there are relatively few completely settled answers. The problems confronted by sociologists are hard questions because there are so many things that influence individuals and group life. This is what makes sociology endlessly interesting and a sociological imagination very much worth acquiring.

## The Big Questions Revisited 1

**1.1** **What Is the Sociological Imagination, and Why Is It Worth Acquiring?** This section introduced the concept of the sociological imagination and explored how it helps us learn to ask hard questions.

The Sociological Imagination

*Looking at the Social World Through a Sociological Lens*

**Learning Objective 1.1.1:** Discuss how a sociological imagination helps to challenge stereotypes.

*Engaging Our Sociological Imaginations: From Personal Puzzles to Sociological Questions*

**Learning Objective 1.1.2:** Explain the process for forming sociological questions.

*Sociological Questions: A Detailed Example*

**Learning Objective 1.1.3:** Identify the types of questions that sociologists are particularly well equipped to explore.

*The Endless Reach of the Sociological Imagination*

**Learning Objective 1.1.4:** Discuss the wide range of topics and areas of life that sociologists study.

**Key Terms**

society (p. 4)    sociology (p. 4)    zoonotic (p. 4)
sociological imagination (p. 6)    stereotype (p. 6)

**1.2**   **What Are Social Contexts, and Why Do They Matter?** Sociology is fundamentally concerned with how we are influenced by society. All of us are situated in an array of social contexts. This section explored how these influence us and our behavior.

Social Contexts: From Individuals to Societies

*Families and Communities*
**Learning Objective 1.2.1:** Analyze how families and communities shape the social development of children.

*Identities and Groups*
**Learning Objective 1.2.2:** Explain how our identities impact our opportunities in life.

*Schools and Organizations*
**Learning Objective 1.2.3:** Discuss how the schools and organizations we participate in shape our lives and identities.

*Social, Economic, and Historical Contexts*
**Learning Objective 1.2.4:** Analyze the ways in which the social and economic context we are born into shapes the opportunities available to us.

*Sociology as the Study of Social Contexts*
**Learning Objective 1.2.5:** Explain the distinction between social interaction and social structure.

**Key Terms**
social context (p. 11)   identity (p. 12)   social interaction (p. 14)   norm (p. 14)   social structure (p. 14)   social hierarchy (p. 15)   institution (p. 15)

**1.3**   **Where Did Sociology Come From, and How Is It Different from Other Social Sciences?** This section examined the context in which sociology began to develop and explored the question of how sociology fits into, and relates to, the other social sciences.

The Sociology of the Social Sciences

*The Birth of Sociology*
**Learning Objective 1.3.1:** Discuss the origins of sociology as a discipline.

*Sociology and the Industrial Revolution*
**Learning Objective 1.3.2:** Explain the roles of industrialization and urbanization in the development of sociology.

*Sociology's Siblings*
**Learning Objective 1.3.3:** Compare and contrast sociology with the other social sciences.

*Sociology's Children*
**Learning Objective 1.3.4:** Identify some of the spin-off fields that originally started in sociology.

**Key Terms**
anecdote (p. 16)   data (p. 16)   Chicago School (p. 17)   industrialization (p. 17)   urbanization (p. 17)   social problems (p. 17)   interdisciplinary research (p. 19)

# Chapter 2
# Social Theory

## by Jeff Manza, Thomas Ertman, Lynne Haney, and Steven Lukes

At the heart of the sociological imagination are the theories about society that give us tools to know what to look for and think about when we seek to understand the social world. The inspiration to develop ideas into social theories can come from a wide variety of sources. One of the authors of this chapter, Steven Lukes, recounts how he was motivated to think about some classical questions in social theory.

> It was during a dinner conversation in Buenos Aires at the height of what was known as Argentina's "Dirty War" in the mid-1970s that I became motivated to think about morality and power. During this time thousands of people—among them trade unionists, journalists, and students—"disappeared" by orders of the Argentinean military government; that is, they were tortured and killed, often in clandestine detention centers, or in some cases simply dropped from planes into the sea. Powerful rulers and governments have resorted to torturing and killing their opponents as a way of holding on to power for centuries. When I voiced concern over what I then knew of these atrocities, my dinner companion—who was the local head of one of the world's leading news agencies—astonished me with his response. I should understand, he explained to me, that in Argentina a lower value was set on life than in Britain, from which I came.

> My astonishment led me to a few questions with implications for approaching issues sociologically. In my simple disbelief of his factual claim, I first wondered on what evidence was it based? My second question was: What motivated him to make this sweeping claim? As a journalist, whose task was to give an unbiased account of the local scene to the world, he seemed to be drawing on personal impressions and stereotyping prejudices. Yet he also seemed to want to offer an impartial and comparative perspective to an overheated and ill-informed visitor.

> While this is not, I hasten to say, a story about good journalism, it does raise the question of what corrective procedures sociology, as distinct from those of journalism, can bring to overcome bias and approach objectivity in marshaling evidence. That question is general, but it is especially intriguing where values are what is at issue, for we know that what people value is shaped by societal contexts and can vary from one context to another or one culture to another. While Argentineans surely have many

## My Sociological Imagination

### THOMAS ERTMAN

As an undergraduate I was passionate about both history and philosophy, but as graduation drew nearer, I wasn't sure how these interests could be reconciled. It was a history professor who suggested I might consider studying sociology because the field encompasses both social theory and historical sociology. I took his advice and quickly discovered that there is hardly an area of life, past or present, to which the sociological imagination cannot fruitfully apply itself. I myself have written and taught on the emergence of the state in the West; democracy and dictatorship in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe; the development of opera and ballet as art forms; and music, literature, and painting in France and Germany. The common thread that unites this research has been the inspiration I have derived from the classical social theorists, especially Max Weber. Although he died nearly a century ago, his writings remain as relevant as ever to our world.

Understanding the circumstances or conditions under which societies change is one of the three common themes that all of the major sociological theories have sought to address in one way or another.

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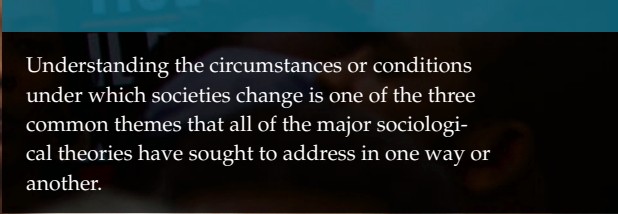
Hebe de Bonafini, the head of Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo group, whose children disappeared during the dirty war of the 1970s, leads one of the marches in Buenos Aires's Plaza de Mayo in December 1979.

*Moreover, it was striking that my journalist companion avoided all mention of power relations—understandably enough, for we were in a restaurant and could be overheard. The context in Argentina at that time was, of course, extreme: a context of terror and coercion, of censorship and self-censorship, where journalists and others bit their tongues and went along with the status quo. How do we ever know what part those in power play in shaping our values, beliefs, and preferences? Sometimes what is extreme can shed light on the normal and the routine. In Argentina, the impact of those in power on ordinary lives was all too visible, if unmentioned over dinner. But how is the sociologist to investigate the less overt and more hidden operations of power in normal times and places?*

*The memory of this striking conversation stayed with me and played an important role in turning my attention to social theories of morality and theories about the relationship between morality and power.*

*distinctive attitudes and customs, it was hard to imagine that caring less about their own lives was one of these. What can sociology contribute to assessing which values are variable and which are constant across contexts and cultures? We know, of course, that suicide bombers do sacrifice their lives, but to notice that is to raise the larger question of the power of ideology and the sociological task of identifying the conditions under which it can motivate individuals to such extreme behavior.*

Lukes's inspiration to think about how social theory could contribute to both understanding individual and societal morality exemplifies the kinds of challenges that social theorists have taken on. By developing frameworks for understanding societies as a whole (or major components within it), leading social theories are a central part of the sociological imagination. In this chapter, we explore some of the most influential of these theories that have developed over the past 150 years.

## The Big Questions

1. **What is social theory?** Social theories enable us to see the social world in different ways. In this section, we identify three common themes that all of the major sociological theories have sought to address.

2. **How did the early social theorists make sense of the world?** The foundations of modern sociology, and social theory as we know it today, can be traced to the writings of a handful of key thinkers working in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. In this section, we introduce the classical social theories of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Jane Addams.

3. **What innovations in social theory emerged in the mid-twentieth century?** After World War II, the interests of social theorists began to shift in new and unexpected directions, and leadership in the development of social theory and sociology as a whole passed from being located primarily in Europe to America. Here, we introduce the new directions in social theory that were embodied by functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

4. **How has a new generation of social theory evolved?** Finally, we provide a brief sampling of some important new theories that have evolved since the 1960s. How have contemporary theorists built upon or transformed the work of classical and mid-twentieth century social theory?

Mark Bussell

## BIG QUESTION 2.1 What Is Social Theory?

## SEEING THE SOCIAL WORLD THROUGH SOCIAL THEORY

Learning social theory is a little like putting on a pair of 3D glasses or night-vision goggles: *Theories*, like specialized glasses, enable us to see things in a different way. Theories guide, but they also provoke: They may encourage us to pay more attention to something we had ignored, ask new or unusual questions that we don't normally think about, or make arguments we so strongly disagree with that we are compelled to come up with a better approach. We don't necessarily need social theories to make observations about the world around us, but they help us know what to look for.

The ambitions of social theorists are considerable, often nothing less than developing a way of understanding how whole societies hold together and how they organize and impact the lives of the individuals who live within them. The best and most lasting social theories have changed the way we understand societies, and the relationships between individuals and groups within those societies, in fundamental ways. In this sense, social theory is central to the sociological imagination.

## The Diversity of Social Theory

**2.1.1** **Define social theory and the range of different social theories.**

**Social theories** are systematic ideas about the relationship between individuals and societies. To put it another way, they are analytical frameworks for understanding the social

**Figure 2.1** Three Common Questions Examined by Social Theorists
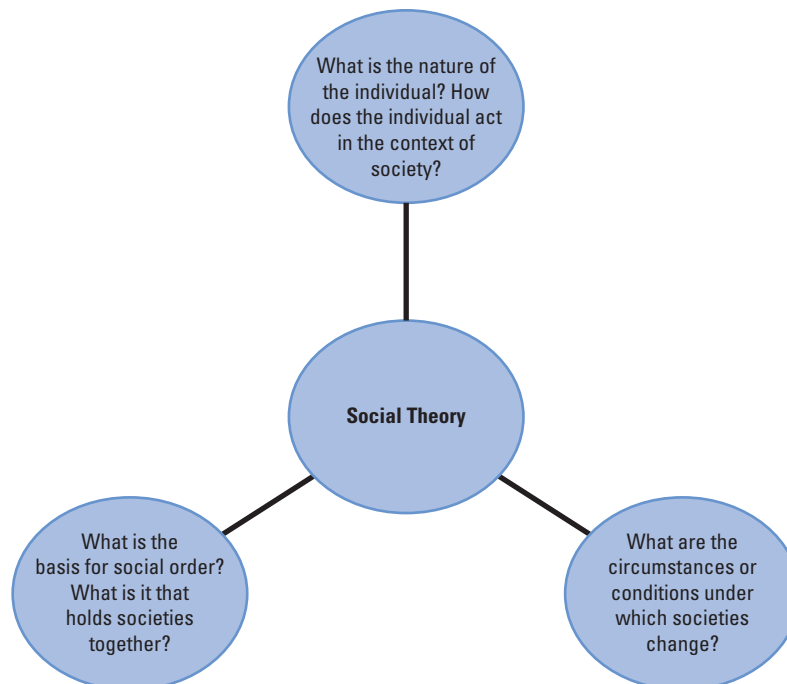
world. This definition is not, unfortunately, very helpful, because there is a wide variety of different kinds of social theories. Some can be very grand—seeking to explain universal features of all societies—while others are much more modest, applying only to a single topic that sociologists study, such as theories about race, gender, or religion.

Sociology is also somewhat unusual among the social sciences in having multiple and often competing social theories and theoretical traditions. The multiplicity of theoretical traditions can be confusing at first. While it does take some effort to sort out the competing ideas and how they relate to one another, we hope to show in this chapter that there are rewards to this effort as well. In spite of the abundance of competing theoretical traditions, there is also a great deal of dialogue among theorists and theoretical traditions, and most contemporary sociologists draw insights and inspiration from more than one theoretical tradition in their work. In this chapter, we will emphasize both the key distinctions and their vital connections as we introduce the most influential of the social theories that have appeared in the past 150 years.

There are three common themes that all of the major sociological theories have sought to address in one way or another, as illustrated in Figure 2.1 (see also Joas and Knobl 2009, p. 18).

Social theories must contend with each of these questions, and leading theorists have done so in varying ways. The first question—what is the nature of the individual?—raises the fundamental question of how to think about the relationship between individuals and the social world. Many of the themes raised in the first chapter reflect this puzzle. The second question—what is the basis for social order?—probes the question of what holds societies together. Despite all of the ways societies are riven with conflict, when we look back at the longer movement of history, what is most striking is how persistent common social practices and institutions actually are. Finally, the third question relates directly to the second: Societies and their major institutions may change only slowly, but change does happen. What are the conditions that make social change possible?
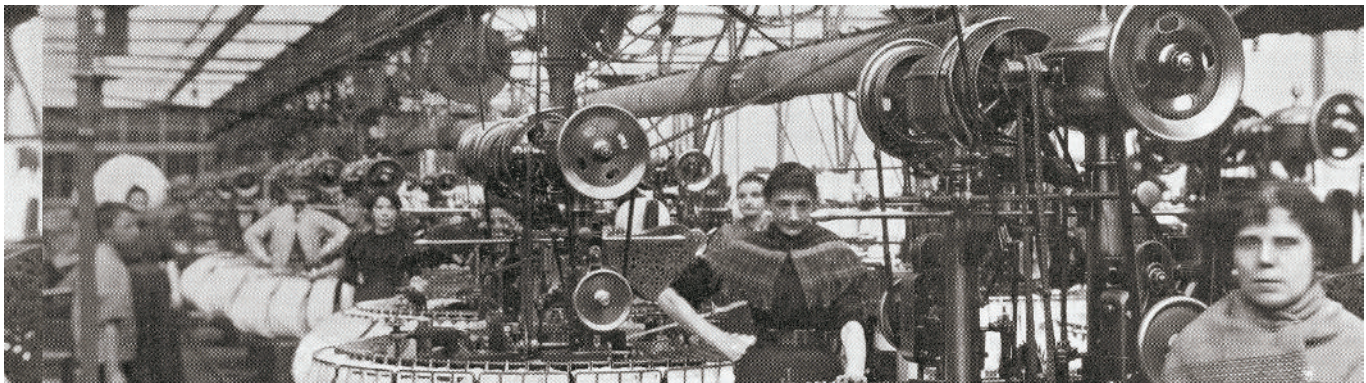


Mark Bussell

## BIG QUESTION 2.2 How Did the Early Social Theorists Make Sense of the World?

### CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Some of the earliest theoretical ideas about society emerged hundreds of years ago and paved the way for the development of modern social theory. Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) was the first to use observation and history, rather than speculative moral or religious philosophy, in his attempts to develop a theory of societies. Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790) developed theories of altruism and capitalism that framed later discussions of these topics. As noted in Chapter 1, French philosopher August Comte (1798–1857) was the first social theorist to explicitly use the term *sociology* as a distinct field of study. Comte is most well known

among sociologists for two things: (1) his landmark contributions to the rise of **positivism** (the claim that every valid idea should be able to be tested with evidence, including that of the social world), and (2) his view of the hierarchy of knowledge, or the idea that sociology plays a special role standing above the other social sciences and history. Comte's work became known to English readers via a very influential and heavily modified translation by nineteenth-century British social theorist and essayist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), whose contributions to social theory were well-known to her contemporaries but largely forgotten until a quite recent rediscovery of her work. Martineau wrote widely about social institutions and, like Comte, emphasized that sociology (and careful sociological examination) could play an important role in moving the world toward a better societal order.

These were among the early thinkers who laid the groundwork, but the foundations of modern sociology, and of social theory as we know it today, can be traced to the writings of a handful of key thinkers working in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. They developed their ideas in a time of enormous change, characterized by four key transitions:

1. The change from an economy rooted in farming and agriculture to one based on industry and factory work (what is referred to as the *Industrial Revolution*)

2. The large-scale movement of people from rural areas to cities and from one country to another (urbanization and immigration)

3. The change of the predominant form of government from monarchies to democracies, organized as sovereign nation-states (many of the countries in Europe established their more-or-less permanent boundaries in this period)

4. Changes in the role of religion in society, with a decline in religious influence on public life as nonreligious ideas became increasingly important

1970  1980  1990  2000

**Neo-Marxism** (Late 1960s–Present)  **Analytical Sociology** (founded by Merton & Coleman)
**Feminist Social Theory** (1970s–Present)

**Herbert Blumer** published *Symbolic Interactionism*  **Michel Foucault** published *Discipline and Punish*  **Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe** (1989)  **James Coleman** published *Foundations of Social Theory*

1960  1950  1940  1930

**Structural Functionalism/Conflict Theory/Symbolic Interactionism** (Mid-Twentieth Century)

**Erving Goffman** published *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*  **American Civil Rights Movement** (1950s–1960s)  **World War II** (1939–1945)  **The Great Depression** (1929–1939)  **Max Weber** *Economy and Society* published posthumously

**C. Wright Mills** published *The Power Elite*  **Talcott Parsons** published *The Social System*  **Talcott Parsons** published *The Structure of Social Action*  **Herbert Mead** *Mind, Self, Society* published posthumously

**Ralf Dahrendorf** published *Class and Class Conflict*

1890  1900  1910  1920

**Classical Social Theory** (Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries)

**Emile Durkheim** published *The Rules of Sociological Method*  **Emile Durkheim** published *Suicide*  **W. E. B. Du Bois** published *The Souls of Black Folks*  **Max Weber** published *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*  **Emile Durkheim** published *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

**World War I** (1914–1918)

1880  1870  1860  1850

**American Civil War Reconstruction** (1865–1877)  **American Civil War** (1861–1865)  **Karl Marx** published volume 1 of *Das Kapital*  **Karl Marx** published *The Communist Manifesto* (with Friedrich Engels)

1810  1820  1830  1840

**Industrial Revolution** (Late Eighteenth to Mid-Nineteenth Centuries)

**Emile Durkheim**
IanDagnall Computing/ Alamy Stock Photo

**W. E. B. Du Bois**
akg-images/ Newscom

**Karl Marx**
INTERFOTO/ Personalities/Alamy Stock Photo

**Max Weber**
INTERFOTO/ Personalities/Alamy Stock Photo

**Pierre Bourdieu**
Ulf Andersen/ Hulton Archive/ Getty Images

## Key Social Theorists

**Ibn Khaldun** (1332–1406)
**Adam Smith** (1723–1790)
**Auguste Comte** (1798–1857)
**Harriet Martineau** (1802–1876)
**Karl Marx** (1818–1883)
**Emile Durkheim** (1858–1917)
**Max Weber** (1864–1920)

**Georg Simmel** (1858–1918)
**W. E. B. Du Bois** (1868–1963)
**Jane Addams** (1860–1935)
**Charlotte Perkins Gilman** (1860–1935)
**Talcott Parsons** (1902–1979)

**Ralf Dahrendorf** (1929–2009)
**Herbert Mead** (1863–1931)
**Herbert Blumer** (1900–1987)

**Erving Goffman** (1922–1982)
**Michel Foucault** (1926–1984)
**Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–1986)
**Robert Merton** (1910–2002)

**James Coleman** (1926–1995)
**Pierre Bourdieu** (1930–2002)

These transitions unfolded slowly, and they were never complete either. Even today, people still farm, many live in rural areas, there are still many undemocratic governments (even monarchies), and religion still has an important influence. But already in the late nineteenth century, many thinkers and early social scientists were sensing that the world was changing, and social theory and the new discipline of sociology emerged in response to these transformations and the sense of crisis they evoked.

We begin our discussion of classical social theory with the writings of Karl Marx, who posed each of the three questions central to social theory in a way that many later theorists would debate and elaborate. We then turn to the writings of five other early thinkers who explored these central themes in ways that have lasting importance: Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Jane Addams.

## Karl Marx (1818–1883)

**2.2.1** **Discuss why Marx believed that societies were so heavily shaped by their economic systems.**

Karl Marx is most well known as a founding figure of the socialist movement. But his theoretical and sociological writings (often written in collaboration with his friend and lifelong intellectual collaborator Friedrich Engels [1820–1895]) also ignited great debate within the discipline of sociology, and many early sociologists and theorists developed their own thinking in critical reaction to Marx. The writings of Marx that have been the most influential for later sociologists start from one key principle: the idea that the way humans produce the things they need to live is the essential foundation of any society. As a result, a society's economic system, and the relationships it creates between individuals and groups, is the defining feature of how that society works.

Because of the centrality of a society's economic system, Marx argued that human history is best understood through the history of different economic systems. In particular, he believed that a society's economic system largely determines what is possible in the realm of politics and culture, so if we want to understand why particular kinds of social or cultural ideas emerge, we should look to that society's economic system.

Why did Marx think that societies were so heavily shaped by their economic systems? His argument starts from the observation that all societies, except the simplest hunting and gathering societies, produce an economic surplus. That is, they collectively produce more goods than are required to meet their minimum physical needs *if* those goods were shared equally. But because it has never been the case that a society truly shares all goods equally, Marx believed that the starting point for the analysis of any society should be two questions about that inequality: First, who takes possession of this surplus? And second, by what means do they do so? Because control over the surplus gives some members of any society extra rewards not shared by everyone else, Marx suggested that in any society's economic system, tensions exist between groups that give rise to conflicts and in extreme cases social revolutions. He referred to the most important of these groups as **classes**, which he meant by those groups of people who share a similar set of economic interests.

In their most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto*, first published in 1848, Marx and Engels ([1848] 2011) divide the history of all societies from antiquity up to their own time into three distinctive **modes of production** that characterize the dominant economic system in a society and the classes that the economic system gives rise to: *ancient societies* based on slavery; *feudalism,* which was characterized by largely agrarian societies with a tiny group of landowners; and *capitalism,* economies organized around market-based exchange. Each of these modes of production consists of two parts—what Marx and Engels call the **forces of production**, or the technological and productive capacity of any society at a given point in time, and the **social relations of production**, which are the relationships

Karl Marx (1818–1865), left, with his lifelong collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), on the right.

and inequalities between different kinds of people within the economy. The forces of production can be thought of as all of the different tools people use to make things, while the relations of production are how people are organized to carry out the tasks needed to produce those things.

Finally, Marx advanced the idea that this economic base exerts a strong influence on what he calls the societal "superstructure," by which he meant the combination of laws, cultural ideas, and political life that can be found in any society (Marx [1859] 1978). This theory is known as **historic materialism**, the idea that history moves in response to society's economic foundation, and the way we think and the possibilities for social and political action are inherently constrained by the economic world we live in. How can this be? How can the economic base influence people's ideas, the legal system, or the political system so directly? Don't we all have our own opinions that have nothing to do with the economy? Marx's idea was that human minds, cultural products, and the legal and political system are always closely tied to the time and place we live in. In other words, individuals form their consciousness from their social context. In the sixteenth century, when agriculture was the dominant form of production, no one would have had the tools to envision what life in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries would become (and all the inventions that would irrevocably change human lives, such as planes, cars, and televisions). Even today, we can barely glimpse a future in which artificial intelligence may enable machines to perform human tasks—although it is true that science fiction does try. The legal system is also a reflection of its time and place; the law continually changes as societies evolve and new questions and problems come before courts or legislatures. No sixteenth-century court of law would have faced the question of whether Google has a de facto monopoly on internet searches. Social change driven by economic change prompts other changes in the law, politics, and a society's culture. In Figure 2.2, we have diagrammed Marx's model of society, starting with the two elements of the mode of production (the forces and relations of production) on the bottom, with an arrow showing the influence of the economic base on what he calls the "superstructure."

As noted, because of the overall importance of the economy in society, Marx thought that the mode of production would largely determine the superstructure, shown on the top of the figure. What Marx meant by superstructure were all of the laws, cultural and intellectual ideas, and political system. In other words, the mode of production would shape or even determine what kinds of laws and government systems were possible at any one point in time, as well as the kinds of ideas that people have about politics and society (Marx [1859] 1978).

Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production in his magnum opus, *Das Kapital* (Marx [1867] 1976) is the starting point for his most systematic analysis of modern (capitalist) societies, as Marx rightly anticipated that capitalism would soon become the dominant economic system around the world. At the heart of capitalist societies, Marx believed, lies the central conflict between members of two classes: the **bourgeoisie**, who possess special resources called **capital**—money or other assets that can be used for business investments—and everyone else. Possession of capital is the critical dividing line between the bourgeoisie, who can use their capital to hire other people to work for them, and the working class, or **proletariat**. Because members of the proletariat own no capital, Marx noted that they must seek paid employment in order to meet their basic needs. Marx also acknowledged that other social groups such as shopkeepers, craftsmen, and farmers occupied a space between elite capitalists and workers. However, because larger enterprises can produce more cheaply than smaller ones, Marx predicted that these intermediate groups would shrink as small producers were driven into bankruptcy and forced to join the ranks of the proletariat. Modern capitalist societies, he thought, would increasingly be polarized between a very small bourgeoisie and an increasingly large working class.

While any mode of production can sustain itself for an extended period, even centuries, Marx thought that eventually every mode of production becomes stagnant and falls into crisis, and when this happens a social revolution is likely to occur, leading to the establishment of a new mode of production. In order

**Figure 2.2** Marx's Model of Society: Components of a Mode of Production
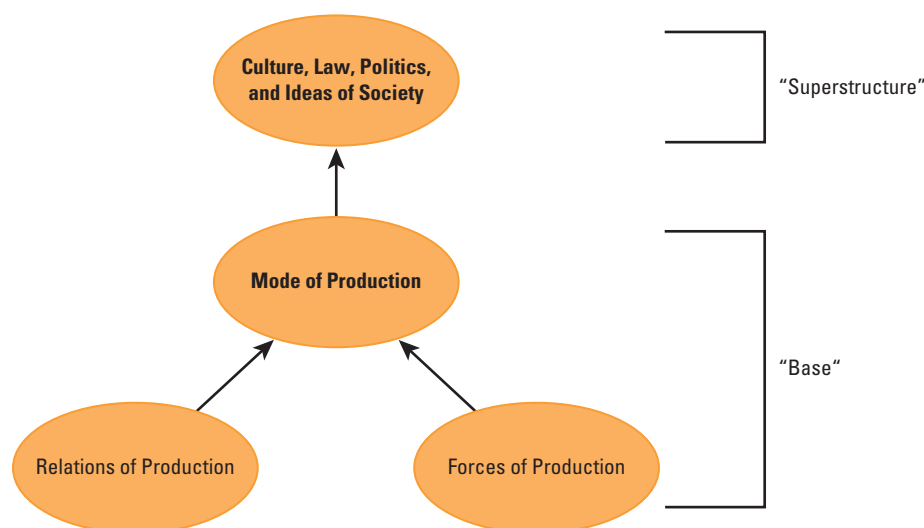
for capitalism to arise, Marx argued that all of the hereditary privileges of landlords, including rules that allowed them to control the lives of agricultural workers, had to be destroyed. This revolutionary change was brought about, according to Marx, by a rising class of capitalists who demanded economic freedoms that did not exist under feudalism. Eventually, just as capitalists overthrew feudalism to create a new and dynamic economic system, Marx thought that the proletariat would create a revolution that would overthrow capitalism in favor of a **socialist society**, in which the productive forces of society are owned by everyone (not by individual business owners). They would be motivated to do so, Marx thought, because over time capitalists, in order to maintain or increase their profit, would be driven to push down the wages of workers until those workers would finally revolt. This theory is known as the theory of **class struggle**, and it is based on the idea that classes of people who are treated so differently by the economic system are inevitably going to be in conflict with one another.

The world in which we live today, especially after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and most other communist countries since 1989, seems far removed from what Marx envisioned. If anything, capitalism seems more entrenched than ever. But capitalism has also changed in ways that Marx (and Engels) did not anticipate in their writings in the nineteenth century. Capitalist societies, especially in the wealthier parts of the world, have developed large government-funded and -operated social programs such as social security, unemployment insurance, free or low-cost health insurance, and educational systems designed to reduce poverty and inequality even in the context of thriving capitalist economies. These economic systems have grown far more diverse, and proven far more versatile, than Marx envisioned. Marx also underestimated the willingness of capitalists to pay workers decent wages, especially when they need to recruit workers with valuable skills or in order to keep workers satisfied. Instead of things getting steadily worse for workers, living standards have steadily risen from the nineteenth century onward.

Yet in two respects Marx's model of society and social change seems very relevant today. First, the German thinker was an early theorist of what we now call **globalization**: the idea that economies and societies are interconnected in ways such that what happens in one place impacts what happens in another. He and Engels anticipated the spread of the capitalist economy to the entire world in the late 1840s, a revolutionary idea at the time, and one that proved remarkably insightful in light of later developments. And the analytical tools of his social theory do provide one way of understanding the role of economic exchange in fostering globalization. Second, the failure of socialism in places like Russia and Eastern Europe, which would seem to contradict Marx's assumptions, can actually be viewed as conforming very well to what Marx himself predicted. One of Marx's most fundamental claims is that only capitalism is capable of building up the tremendous productive capacity needed to make socialism and communism work. Socialist leaders such as Lenin and Mao (in Russia and China respectively) attempted to skip this crucial stage of development by moving from a feudal mode of production directly to socialism (that is, they tried to skip over the stage of capitalism altogether). This proved to be impossible, and in responding to these failures later rulers in these countries eventually resorted to reintroducing capitalism (as Marx might well have predicted). The resulting expansion of economic activity that the turn to capitalism has created more recently, especially in China which has had some of the fastest growth rates in the world, has been impressive. If he were alive today, rather than seeing the failure of communism as the failure of his idea of history, Marx might well argue that the true socialist revolution still lies in the future for countries like Russia and China, but only after they go through a long period of capitalist growth and development.



A factory in Zhejiang, China. Marx and Engels would not have been surprised that the Chinese economy has grown rapidly after the introduction of free-market capitalism since the late 1970s. However, they probably would be surprised that Marxism remains the official ideology of the Chinese government, in spite of its embrace of capitalist reforms!

Lou Linwei/Alamy Stock Photo

# Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

**2.2.2**  **Analyze Emile Durkheim's theory of what holds societies together.**

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim is properly regarded as one of the founding figures of the discipline of sociology. Like Marx, Durkheim sought to try to understand the changes taking place around him during a period of extraordinary growth and change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Durkheim wondered how societies would continue to function in the face of these changes. Durkheim believed that the sociologist was responsible for answering these questions, almost like a doctor treating a patient—the sociologist's patient was society, and the sickness that needed to be cured was the various forms of social disorder that rapid industrialization was producing. Durkheim's contributions were many, but we will focus on three: his development of the concept of the social fact, his analysis of the roots of social solidarity, and his analysis of religion as a force in modern life.

In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim [1895] 1982), Durkheim made a case for the need for sociology by comparing it to the sciences of biology and physics. He argued that just like biology or physics, sociology examines a force in the world that is objective and exists independently of our ability to control it. For example, just as gravity is a force that exists external to us and is not made by



Mark Bussell

Many ordinary rituals appear to us as completely natural, yet they are the result of societal forces. Marriage, for example, is both expected and valued in most societies. Durkheim called ideas about the importance of rituals such as marriage as one of the many "social facts" that most members of a society learn and take for granted.

us, so too do social forces exist objectively in the world. We cannot defy gravity (at least not easily), but we also cannot usually defy what Durkheim referred to as **social facts**—those regularities and rules of everyday life that every human community has. Shortly after Durkheim defined the social fact, sociologists and other social scientists began to refer to them as **social forces** rather than social facts. The term *social forces* connotes something broader than what Durkheim originally meant by *social fact*, but the two are closely related. Social facts, or social forces, are "social" in the sense that they arise from human action at some point in the past, and they are "facts" (or "forces") in the sense that we are born into a world where there are many rules and customs (sometimes written down, but often not) that we are obliged to obey if we are to fit in to our community and successfully interact with others.

How do these social forces work? In asking this question, Durkheim was on to something that would become the foundation of nearly all social theories that would follow: Human behavior is not natural but learned; in other words, we are trained, or socialized, to act the ways that we do. And for Durkheim, one of the key things involved is the **socialization** process, the way we are taught to behave in society (and all of the different situations we encounter). Among the most important of all social forces that act upon us are *norms* (see Chapter 1). Durkheim noted that one of the ways that we know norms exist is what happens when we violate them and we receive some kind of sanction for our misstep.



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Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). In the early twentieth century, Durkheim was the most famous sociologist in the world, and his contributions to the development of sociology as a social science are central.

The idea that social forces are important for their influence on individual behavior was put to the test in Durkheim's next book, *Suicide* (Durkheim [1897] 1997), which was not only a classic demonstration of the power of sociological analysis but also a landmark in the integration of social theory and empirical research. At first glance, the act of ending one's own life appears to be the most private act imaginable, rooted in the unique details of an individual's personal life or psyche. Yet by stepping back and carefully analyzing the statistics on who commits suicide—such as variations in the suicide rate between countries, or annual and regional fluctuations of suicides within the same country—Durkheim concluded that the probability that a certain number of people will kill themselves at a given time and place is in fact very much influenced by social factors (such as religious beliefs, marital status, the country you live in, whether or not a war is being fought, and an individual's educational level).

Durkheim's insights about social forces impacting the likelihood of suicide will not help us to explain, let alone accept, a suicide committed by a friend or family member. But they do underline in striking fashion a broader truth, namely that we as individuals are embedded in a larger social world, and our likelihood of committing suicide is not entirely random.

Related to the question of the impact of social forces is one of the critical questions that occupied Durkheim throughout his career: What is it that holds societies together? This is the problem of what Durkheim called **social solidarity** (Durkheim [1890] 1997). In particular, he wondered where the shared morals and connections between individuals come from; how it is that social facts get established in the first place. Durkheim drew a contrast between two distinct forms of social solidarity—mechanical and organic solidarity—each of which is connected with different kinds of shared morals reflecting the different kinds of societies in which they arise. **Mechanical solidarity** is the dominant form of solidarity in what Durkheim called "primitive" societies, which are built around extended families or clans connected in tribes, such as the Iroquois or the Apache. They are characterized by a very minimal **division of labor** (or specialization of tasks), with an economic system consisting primarily of hunting and gathering or simple agriculture. By contrast, modern societies are characterized by **organic solidarity**, in which a very extensive division of labor and mutual dependence among people can be found.

How, according to Durkheim, did we move from a world of simple, "mechanical" societies (represented for Durkheim in tribal communities in which responsibility for tasks was shared) to those of today, characterized

Emile Durkheim's ideas about tribal societies (where he thought there was little room for individuality) contrasted with modern societies where diversity and social complexity is common. Both types of societies face the problem of creating social solidarity, but Durkheim argued they do it in very different ways.

by a division of labor involving people who do lots of different things and may have little in common with one another? Durkheim argued that premodern societies were held together because people were engaged in much of the same or similar activities and therefore shared a worldview. Modern societies, Durkheim wrote, resemble the ways in which a living organism operates, where specialized organs work together to hold the whole together. As the populations of simpler societies expanded outward and then, running up against natural or human barriers, became denser in cities, competition for survival among their members increased. One particularly successful response to this situation proved to be specialization: Individuals could acquire skills as carpenters, stonemasons, or blacksmiths and make a living doing it.

So what exactly holds modern (organic) societies together? Durkheim eventually came to advance the idea that modern societies, characterized by growing diversity and complexity, still require some widely shared, sacred beliefs to hold people together. What kinds of beliefs could achieve this level of acceptance? Durkheim suggested a surprising answer: that the key to the forms of solidarity in modern societies lies in the fact that these societies

guarantee individuals a measure of freedom that primitive societies did not. He even characterized this as the "cult of the individual." By this, Durkheim meant that in modern societies, we are freer to express our individual tastes, preferences, and interests because society does not seek to make everyone conform to the same set of beliefs about morality, and we perceive these individual rights as so central that they become sacred (and embedded in social institutions and the law).

As he continued to reflect on the nature of social solidarity, Durkheim developed a profound and original theory of the role religion has played in both primitive and modern societies. From his investigations, Durkheim developed a particular definition of religion as centering on the **sacred**—those objects, places, and symbols that are set apart from daily life and elicit awe and reverence, sustained by myths and rituals. The sacred for Durkheim did not require reference to the supernatural. While many sacred objects (such as the Bible or Koran) or practices (Christmas) make reference to God, there are many other things that are sacred that do not. For example, for many Americans burning or desecrating the American flag is to violate a sacred (but not religious) object. Durkheim's idea that it is social forces that create our sense of what is sacred opens the door to a whole new way of understanding religion. If religion is not the creation of God or some other supernatural force, it must inevitably be a human creation. But why is religion so common in all societies? And how, when, and why do humans come to create and recreate these sacred practices? Durkheim's answer relates back to his general interest in social solidarity: Religion helps to knit groups of people or whole societies together. It provides individuals with a common set of beliefs and makes both individuals and societies stronger.

## Max Weber (1864–1920)

**2.2.3** **Discuss Max Weber's contributions to our understanding of motivations for behavior, legitimacy and authority, and status groups and social closure.**

The German sociologist Max Weber's contributions to the development of our understanding of modern societies were varied, complex, and important in ways that sociologists continually rediscover. His range of knowledge was so vast—in his writings he explored the history and societies of many major civilizations and religious traditions of the world, as well as such technical topics as agricultural production and prices in Prussia—that it is perhaps not surprising that his lasting contributions to



Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber's intellectual career was slowed by periods of depression, but his outpouring of work covering such a wide range of topics, usually guided by research about multiple countries and historical periods, established how wide-ranging sociological theory and research could be.

social theory addressed several important issues. We will focus on three: his writings on the motives of individual behavior, the forms of legitimate authority, and his concept of the status group and the seemingly universal process of how groups seek to monopolize opportunities for their members.

One of Weber's foundational contributions was to consider the role of individual action and behavior as a foundation for social order. Whereas Marx focused on material conditions and Durkheim on morality and social forces, Weber argued that there is something else we need to consider when we study societies: the motivations that guide individual behavior—in other words, the reasons we behave the way that we do. This is especially important for understanding human societies because Weber believed those motivations have changed over time.

Weber's analysis of motives stands in sharp contrast to Durkheim's emphasis on social facts, which are characterized by their objectivity and by being external to the individual. Weber argued that in order to

**Figure 2.3** Weber's Typology of Motives for Action



**Instrumental rationality**
*Behavior oriented toward gaining or achieving some specific reward*

**Value rationality**
*Behavior guided by a belief in some ultimate value, regardless of rewards*

**Types of Social Action**

**Affectual motives**
*Action that is guided by positive or negative emotions*

**Traditional motives**
*Action guided by a belief in following established traditions*

understand the motivations for behavior, we need to not just look at the social environment but also get inside people's heads and figure out how they interpret and give meaning to the world around them. In this way, Weber introduced a whole new dimension to the work of sociologists: interpretation of individual action. In *Economy and Society*, published shortly after his death, Weber writes that "Sociology is a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action" (Weber [1922] 1978, p.4). This approach is known as **interpretative sociology**, a translation form of the German word *verstehen*, which means understanding.

Weber went on to develop a typology of different kinds of social action, each differentiated by the motivations (or rationales) that guide them, as Figure 2.3 illustrates.

We can understand more concretely Weber's ideas about the different motives of action in terms of a specific example. Let's consider the different reasons a student might choose to attend a class while they are in college. The instrumental reasons are pretty straightforward: A student attends class because her goal is to graduate from college, perhaps in the hopes of finding a good career and making more money than she otherwise would. Coming to class will increase her chances of getting good grades, which will lead her to graduate with a strong GPA, which will enable her to land a good job, which may enable her to make a good income. In contrast, another student could come to class guided by value-rational principles, in which case he attends class because he believes in the value of education for its own

sake, without thinking about any instrumental or self-interested outcomes it might provide him. Another student might come to class guided by emotions, for example a fear that missing a class even when attendance is not required is just disrespectful or will be sanctioned by the instructor. In this case, we would say his behavior expressed an affectual orientation. And finally, yet another student attends class because that is what her parents and grandparents did, and going to school is what she has been doing since kindergarten. It is, in other words, a tradition for which she doesn't think about any alternative.

In his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber [1904] 2008), Weber applied his concern with individual motivations for behavior to advance a startling theory about why capitalism appeared earlier and grew faster in some parts of the world than in others. He argued that the influence of certain religious movements—notably Protestantism—seemed to be closely connected to those places that had the earliest and most successful capitalist economies. In particular, he argued that the
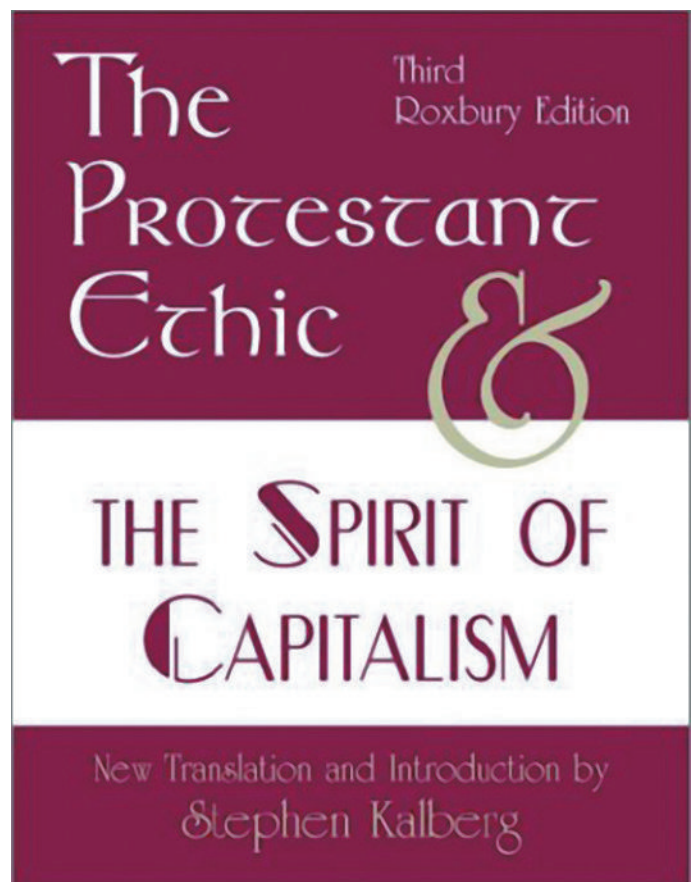
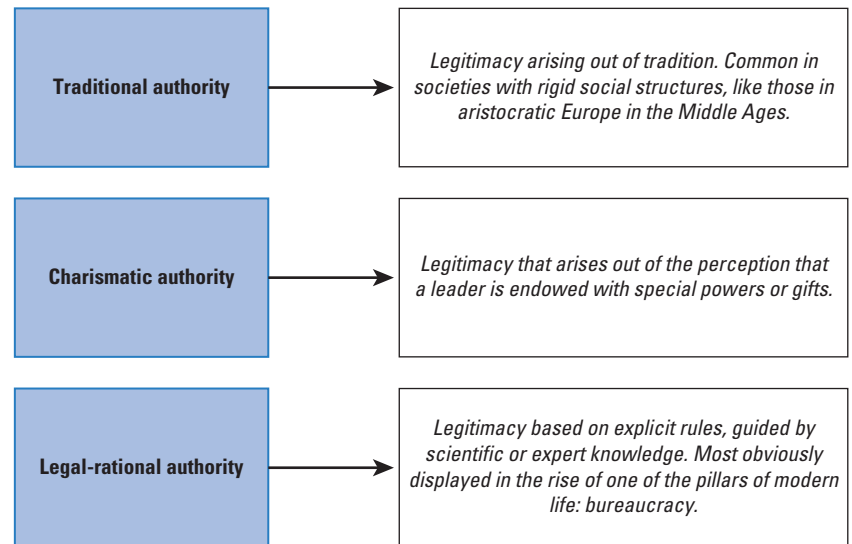In his influential book *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber observed that Protestantism seemed to be closely aligned to the most successful capitalist economies. Weber argued that devout Protestants believed that hard work and economic success meant that you were in God's good graces. He theorized that this was the reason that capitalism grew faster in some parts of the world than in others.

appearance of strict forms of Protestantism fundamentally altered market behavior in places where they were most numerous (first in Britain, America, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany and Switzerland, and later elsewhere) because these early strict Protestants believed that it was a sign that you were in God's good graces if you became economically successful. This encouraged Protestants to work in a highly disciplined, methodical manner, and then save and reinvest whatever they earned (as opposed to consuming it). Weber believed that this gave strict Protestants an advantage over market participants from other religious groups in Europe (most notably Catholics). Eventually, the success of the strict Protestants encouraged others to assume the work habits and investment practices if they were to survive in the marketplace. By the eighteenth century, then, a new set of distinctly modern behavior norms ("the spirit of modern capitalism") had emerged out of what had been the religious attitudes ("the Protestant ethic") of a small minority.

A second major contribution to sociology developed in Weber's work concerns how and why people respect hierarchies and obey orders. Weber made a famous distinction between power and authority. He defines **power** as a person's ability to achieve his or her objective even if someone else wants to try to prevent it. An example of this would be when a ruler gets people to submit to his will and follow his orders by compelling them to do so through force or the threat of force. However, Weber argues that this is the exception; you can't always get your way by using force. There are far more cases where governments (or even our superiors) invoke what Weber called **authority**: the capacity to get people to do things because they think that they should abide by the commands of people above them.

Where does authority come from? Most of the time people tend to voluntarily obey orders—that is, they accept the authority of their rulers. But why? Weber explored the sources of authority by developing a theory of why and how leaders gain what he called **legitimacy**. When authority figures have legitimacy, we obey them not because of the threat of force but because we believe obeying their orders is the right thing to do. And in this way, Weber argues, the most successful political regimes are those that are able to legitimize their rule. As with Weber's basic proposition that behavior is guided by how people interpret the world and give meaning to it, he argues that voluntary obedience to authority comes as a result of people interpreting the ruler to have legitimacy.

**Figure 2.4**  Three Types of Legitimate Domination



| Traditional authority | → | Legitimacy arising out of tradition. Common in societies with rigid social structures, like those in aristocratic Europe in the Middle Ages. |
| Charismatic authority | → | Legitimacy that arises out of the perception that a leader is endowed with special powers or gifts. |
| Legal-rational authority | → | Legitimacy based on explicit rules, guided by scientific or expert knowledge. Most obviously displayed in the rise of one of the pillars of modern life: bureaucracy. |

Weber distinguishes between different kinds of legitimacy, each connected to different interpretations of why one should voluntarily obey the ruler. Figure 2.4 illustrates these three distinct types of legitimate domination, which Weber called traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational.

Authority based on tradition is when the system of ruling authority is simply taken for granted because "that is the way things are done." Monarchies are classic examples; when the king or queen dies, the oldest son typically inherits the throne. Monarchies and other traditional systems of authority may seem permanent, but we know from history that kingdoms do not last forever. So how can change ever come to traditional societies, for example, those that are structured around extended families and rigid status hierarchies, and have rulers who have virtually unlimited power? Weber was especially fascinated by the role played by key individual leaders whom he saw as having **charisma**. The term *charisma* is derived from a Greek word meaning "gift of grace." Weber introduced the term into modern language to account for special cases in which unique individuals have appeared who claim special powers or gifts that their followers believe to be true. Most famously, these have been revolutionary religious figures—the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha—but the idea of charisma can also apply to modern social and political leaders as well (for example, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Adolf Hitler, or perhaps even Donald Trump). If such figures are to attract a following, they must demonstrate their special powers through extraordinary deeds that appear to be like miracles. Belief in a leader's charisma in turn inspires people to reject the status quo and join a new community of disciples. In this way a charismatic figure possesses the power, according to Weber, to break

Charismatic leader? Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign exhibited many of the characteristics of charisma identified by Max Weber. Trump repeatedly proclaimed that he possessed certain special skills and gifts that make him uniquely able to "Make America Great Again."

through the constraints of traditional authority to create new forms of legitimate domination built upon personal charisma. This authority is potentially revolutionary because the charismatic leader who calls into question traditional norms and rules proposes to replace them with new moral guidelines revealed to the leader by a higher (perhaps godly) power.

Finally, a third major contribution to social theory and sociology in Weber's writings was an important and influential theory of what he called **status groups**, groups of people with similar kinds of attributes or identities such as those based on religion, ethnicity, or race. Recall that Karl Marx had argued that classes and class conflict arising out of the economic system of any society were the central source of tension (and ultimately revolution) in any society. Weber acknowledged that economic class conflict was sometimes important, but conflicts between religious groups or racial and ethnic groups were often just as important or even more so. In contrast to economic classes, Weber emphasized that status groups are based on communities of members that share a common identity that can arise from many different sources. We all have various potential groups we could identify with; for example, depending on the families we are born into (and the religion and race or ethnicity our families confer upon us) or identities we develop as we get older (such as our occupation, our education, our sexuality, or communities we may voluntarily join like a neighborhood association or a feminist activist group). But which of these statuses become a source of our conscious thoughts and actions depend in part on which are organized into communities of similar people. An individual may be a Catholic, gay, a woman, able bodied,

from California, with parents born in Mexico; they may aspire to be an actor, become a volleyball player, and be a fan of Beyoncé. Which of those possible identities becomes a source of status-group membership depends in part on which distinctive communities or organizations are capable of influencing people to actively identify with them.

Status groups based on one's religion, sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status have all shown to be meaningful factors in access to jobs or other kinds of opportunities; in limiting what job you can aspire to, who you can date or marry, and where you can live; and in whether you can gain membership in desired social clubs or groups. Status-group struggles, Weber argued, have been an important aspect of every society's **stratification system**, that is, all of the major forms of inequality between groups that persist over time. Weber did not deny that conflict between classes could be important, but he thought that Marx's emphasis on class struggle as the motor force of history neglected many other ways in which group competition and conflict influence the process of historical change.

Weber not only advanced a broader conception of group conflict and struggle than Marx, but he also introduced an important concept for understanding *how* groups seek to gain advantage over other groups: by systematically excluding nonmembers from gaining access to opportunities (or, to put it another way, groups try to monopolize opportunities for their own members). He called this process **social closure**, a term that captures the various ways that groups seek to close off access to opportunities by other groups. Closure is, in short, the process by which groups seek to monopolize opportunities or rewards. Social closure can be formalized in law (such as in the American South after the Civil War, under the Jim Crow system, or the system of *apartheid* in South Africa, where Blacks were often legally prevented from attending the same schools, using certain public facilities, marrying Whites, or living in the same neighborhoods as Whites). But closure need not be written into law; it can also occur in less formal ways. For example, limited opportunities for women and minorities to enter the ranks of top management in large corporations persisted long after civil rights laws were changed to give everyone equal opportunity. How? One way is that companies can change hiring and promotion policies in subtle ways to favor White men, thereby maintaining a kind of corporate culture in which women or minorities are often disadvantaged (Kantor 1977; Dobbin 2011).