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RITZER // STEPNISKY Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots 6E

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EDITION 6

Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots

THE BASICS

GEORGE RITZER // JEFFREY STEPNISKY

Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots

Sixth Edition

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Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots

The Basics

Sixth Edition

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University of Maryland

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

GEORGE RITZER, Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland, was named a Distinguished Scholar-Teacher there and received the American Sociological Association's Distinguished Contribution to Teaching Award. He holds an honorary doctorate from La Trobe University and was awarded the Robin William Lectureship by the Eastern Sociological Society. He has chaired four sections of the American Sociological Association: Theoretical Sociology, Organizations and Occupations, Global and Transnational Sociology, and the History of Sociology. He has written many refereed articles, but he is best known for his monographs dealing with sociological theory, consumption, and globalization. *The McDonaldization of Society* (9th ed., 2018) has been his most widely read and influential work. It has been translated into more than a dozen languages, and overall his work has been translated into more than twenty languages. Most of his writing over the past decade has been in the form of articles and essays on prosumption.

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PREFACE

This sixth edition of *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots* was revised during the global coronavirus pandemic. That event has demonstrated the ongoing relevance of sociology and social theory to understanding our world. Social theory helps us think about the social forces that influence the spread, management, and social response to disease. Cutting-edge theories also help us reflect upon the relation between society and nature (and of course health and illness) in ever new and interesting ways. Several chapters now reference the pandemic, although a new chapter, "Science, Nature and Technology" (Chapter 12), provides the most developed conceptual tools for understanding the relationships among science (including medical science), technology, and nature. The contemporary application box in Chapter 12 draws special attention to the relevance of actor-network theory for analyzing the relationship between SARS-CoV-2 (the official name of the virus that causes COVID-19) and society. Chapter 12 is also significant because it includes a lengthy discussion of one of the newest areas of sociological theory—theories of the Anthropocene. These theories address the relationship between humans and the planet Earth, especially the impact that human activity plays in changing the climate and affecting the biosphere more generally. Given the pressing problem of climate change and its implications for social organization, this is likely to become one of the most important areas of theoretical development in coming years. This chapter also includes new biographies (on Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway) and new key concepts (on assemblage and realism).

In addition, Patricia Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge have significantly revised their chapter on feminist theory (Chapter 8). This includes updates to sections on psychoanalytic feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, and structural oppression. They have also added new sections on hegemonic masculinity, postcolonial theory, and neoliberalism and introduced a new contemporary application box on "The #MeToo Movement" and a new biography on Raewyn Connell. Chapter 9 includes a new application box on "Anticolonialism and the Destruction of Statues." Chapter 10 includes a new application on "Fake News" and a significantly revised application box on "The Death of Consumer Culture." There are additional smaller changes including minor edits and additions to the suggested readings throughout.

Beyond these changes, the structure of the book remains as it was before. As always, our aim is to provide an accessible, readable introduction to the most

important ideas in sociological theory with a focus on contemporary relevance and applicability.

Resources for instructors are available at http://study.sagepub.com/ritzertheory.

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We would like to thank Patricia Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge for the continuing inclusion of their chapter on feminist theory. Thanks also to Michelle Meagher for ongoing support and Alex Castleton for feedback on theories of science, technology, and nature. We are also grateful to students in MacEwan's Soci 333 (Contemporary Sociological Theory) with whom Stepnisky piloted instruction on Latour's and Haraway's challenging ideas. We're also grateful for conversations with David Ilkiw and Kilian LaBonté-Bon that helped Stepnisky figure out how to present Latour's *Down to Earth*. At SAGE we would like to thank the entire team included but not limited to Jeff Lasser, Tiara Beatty, Vishwajeet Mehra, and our copy editor, Pam Schroeder.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Everyone theorizes about the social world (and many other things—natural events, supernatural possibilities) virtually all of the time. Most generally this means that people think about, speculate on, social issues. We might think about our parents' relationship with each other or speculate about the chances that our favorite team will win the league championship or whether China will go to war with Taiwan. On the basis of such speculation, we are likely to develop theories about our parents (e.g., they get along well because they have similar personalities), our team (they will not win the championship because they lack teamwork), or the possibility of war (China will not go to war because war would threaten China's recent economic advances). These theories deal with social realities and social relationships—for example, the personalities of our parents and how those personalities affect the way they relate to each other, teamwork and the ability to win a championship, and the nature of China and its relationship to other nations in an era in which national economies are increasingly tightly intertwined with the global economy.

CREATING SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Social theorists, including those discussed in this book, do much the same kind of thing—they speculate and develop theories, and their theories deal with social realities and social relationships. Of course, there are important differences between everyday theorizing and that of social theorists:

1. Social thinkers usually theorize in a more disciplined and self-conscious manner than do people on an everyday basis.
2. Social thinkers usually do their theorizing on the basis of the work of social thinkers who have come before them. Thus, virtually all social theorists have carefully studied the work of their forebears, whereas most laypeople operate largely, if not totally, on their own. To paraphrase Isaac Newton and, more recently, the sociologist Robert Merton, if social theorists have developed better theories, it is because they have been able to build upon the ideas of those thinkers who came before them.
3. In addition, social theorists also often rely on data, either gathered by themselves or collected by others, on the social realities or relationships of interest to them. Laypeople may have some data at their disposal when they theorize, but these data are likely to be far less extensive and to be collected much less systematically.
4. Unlike laypeople, social theorists seek to publish their theories (major examples of such writings will be examined in this book) so that they can be critically analyzed, more widely disseminated, used as a basis for empirical research, and built upon by later theorists. The rigors of the review process help ensure that weak theories are weeded out before they are published.
5. Most important, social theorists do not, at least professionally, think about specific relationships involving their parents, their favorite teams, or even particular nations. Social theorists generally think in a more inclusive manner about broad social issues, whereas the layperson is more likely to speculate about much narrower, even personal, issues. Thus, in terms of the three examples already mentioned, although a layperson is likely to speculate about the relationship between their parents, the social theorist thinks about the more general issue of, for example, the changing nature of spousal relations in the early 21st century. Similarly, the layperson who thinks about the chances of success of their favorite team contrasts with the social theorist who might be concerned with issues such as the unfairness of competition between sports teams in the era of large salaries and budgets. Finally, rather than theorizing about China, a social theorist might think about the contemporary nation-state in the era of global capitalism (see Chapter 11).

Although social theorists think in general terms, this is not to say that the issues of concern to them are only of academic interest. In fact, the issues that theorists choose to examine are often of great personal interest to them (and many others) and are frequently derived from issues of import in their personal lives. Thus, the stresses and strains in their parents' marriage, or even in their own, might lead a sociologist to theorize about the general issue of the modern family and the difficulties that abound within it. The best sociological theories often stem from the deep personal interests of theorists.

However, this poses an immediate dilemma. If the best theory stems from powerful personal interests, isn't it likely that such a theory could be biased and distorted by those interests and personal experiences? The bad experiences that a theorist had as a child in their own home, or their own marital problems, might bias them against the nuclear family and give them a distorted view of it. This, in turn, might lead them in the direction of a theory critical of such a family. This is certainly possible, even likely, but theorists must and usually do manage to keep their personal biases in check. Yet bias is an ever-present danger that both theorists and those who read theory must keep in the forefront of their thinking.

Balancing this is the fact that feeling strongly about an issue is a powerful motivator. Sociologists with strong feelings about the family or any other topic are likely to do sustained work on it and to feel driven to come up with useful theoretical insights. As long as biases are kept in check, strong personal feelings often lead to the best in social theory. For example, in this volume we will have a number of occasions to mention Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his pioneering work on capitalism (see Chapter 2). In many ways, Marx's theory of capitalism is one of the best in the history of social theory, and it was motivated by Marx's strong feelings about the capitalist system and the plight of the workers in such a system. It is true that these feelings may have blinded Marx to some of the strengths of the capitalist system, but that is counterbalanced by the fact that these feelings led to a powerful theory of the dynamics of capitalism.

One can theorize about any aspect of the social world, and social theorists have speculated about things we would expect them to think about (politics, family) as well as others that we might find quite surprising (e.g., one of the authors of this textbook, George Ritzer, has done work on things like fast-food restaurants, credit cards, and shopping malls). Every aspect of the social world, from the most exalted to the most mundane, can be the subject of social theory. Individual social theorists find different aspects of the social world important and interesting, and it is in those areas that they are likely to devote their attention. Some might find the behavior of kings and presidents interesting, whereas others might be drawn to that of homeless persons and sex workers. Furthermore, still others, often some of the best social theorists, are drawn to the relationship between highly exalted and highly debased behavior. For example, Norbert Elias (1897–1990) focused on the period between the 13th and 19th centuries and how mundane behaviors such as picking one's nose at the dinner table, blowing one's nose, and expelling wind were related to changes in the king's court (see Chapter 5). In terms of mundane

behaviors, he found that over time people grew less and less likely to pick their noses at the table, to stare into their handkerchiefs at the results of blowing their noses, and to noisily and publicly expel wind. These shifts in behavior were linked to changes in the king's court that were eventually disseminated to the rest of society. Basically, the members of the king's court became dependent on a wider and wider circle of people with the result that they became more sensitive about the impact of at least some of their behaviors (e.g., violence against others) and more circumspect about those behaviors. Eventually, as circles of dependence widened, this greater sensitivity and circumspection made their way to the lower reaches of society, and to put it baldly, people generally stopped picking their noses at the dinner table and noisily expelling wind in public. (The exceptions are now quite notable.)

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE (1805–1859)

A Biographical Vignette

There are several ironies associated with the work of Alexis de Tocqueville. First, he was a French scholar, but his best-known work deals with the United States. Second, he was an aristocrat, but he is famous for his work on democracy. Third, he is most often thought of as a political scientist, but he made important contributions to sociology and sociological theory (see, e.g., the Key Concept box "Civil Society" in Chapter 11). His best-known work, Volume 1 of *Democracy in America* (published in 1835), is largely political in nature. It deals with the American political system and how it compares to others, particularly the French political system. The second volume of that work (published in 1840) is less well-known and was less well received, but it is far more sociological. Among other things, it deals broadly with culture, social class, "individualism" (Tocqueville is often credited with having invented the term, now popular in sociological theory), and social change.

Finally, by the time of his later work *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (published in 1856), Tocqueville had grown nostalgic for the aristocratic system (he wrote of the "catastrophic downfall of the monarchy") and increasingly critical of democracy and socialism. He saw both as involving far too much centralization of decision making. He felt that in his younger years aristocrats were freer and made more independent decisions. Such aristocrats served as a counterbalance to the power of centralized government. In spite of this, Tocqueville was enough of a realist to understand that there was no going back to an aristocratic system. Rather, he argued that "associations of plain citizens" should form bodies that would serve to counter the power of centralized government and protect freedoms. Such bodies are close to those that make up what we now think of as civil society.

Social thinkers may focus on particular behaviors because they find them important and interesting, but they also may do so because such study provides them with a point of entry into the social world. This idea is based on the perspective of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) that the social world comprises an endless series of social relationships (see Chapter 3). Each social act, in this view, is part of a social relationship, and each relationship, in turn, is ultimately related to every other social relationship. Thus, a focus on any given act or relationship can serve as a way of gaining a sense of the entirety of the social world, even the essential aspects and meanings of that world. Thus, Simmel chose to concentrate on money and relationships based on money as a specific way of gaining insight into the entirety of modern society.

Although there is a great gap between the theories discussed in this book and the theories we all create every day, the point is that there is *no* essential difference between professional and lay theorizing. If, after you read this book, you study previous theorizing and then theorize in a more systematic and sustained manner about general social issues, you will be a social theorist. Of course, being a social theorist does not necessarily mean that you will yield high-quality theories. Your first efforts are not likely to be as good as the theories discussed in this book. In fact, the theories discussed in the following pages are the best of the best. Further, the work of many social theorists, some quite well-known in their time, is not discussed here because it has not stood the test of time, and the resulting social theories are no longer considered important. Thus, many have tried but only a few have succeeded in creating high-quality and important social theories.

DEFINING SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Standing the test of time is one characteristic of the theories discussed in this book. Another is that they have a wide range of applicability. For example, they explain behavior not simply in your family but in a large number of similar families in the United States and perhaps even in other nations around the world. Still another characteristic of these theories is that they deal with centrally important social issues. For instance, climate change (see Chapter 12) and the impact that human society has on planetary systems is a key issue that has attracted the attention of a growing number of theorists. Finally, the theories discussed in this book were created either by sociologists or thinkers in other fields whose work has come to be defined as important by sociologists. For example, we devote a great deal of attention to feminist sociological theory in this book, but although some feminist theorists are sociologists (e.g., Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins), the vast majority are social thinkers from a wide variety of other fields, such as philosophy and literary theory. Whether or not they were created by sociologists, the theories discussed here have been built upon by others who have refined them, expanded on them, or tested some of their basic premises in empirical research.

Sociological theory can be more formally defined as a set of interrelated ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge of the social world, the explanation of that world, and predictions about the future of that world. Although some of the theories discussed in the pages that follow meet all of these criteria to a high degree, many others fall short on one or more of them. Nonetheless, they are all considered full-fledged sociological theories for purposes of this discussion. Whether or not they meet all the criteria, all the theories discussed here are considered by large numbers of sociologists (as well as scholars in many other fields) to be important theories. Perhaps most important, all of these are big ideas about issues and topics of concern to everyone in the social world.

CREATING SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: A MORE REALISTIC VIEW

Up to this point, we have offered an idealized picture of sociological theory and the way it is created. In recent years a number of sociological theorists have grown increasingly critical of this image and have sought to create a more accurate picture of theory and theory creation. They point out that at least some theorists are undisciplined (if not downright casual): they don't always study the work of their predecessors in detail, they aren't always careful about collecting data that bear on their theories, their work is not always reviewed rigorously prior to publication, they allow their personal experiences to distort their theories, and so on. Overall, the point is made that the creation of sociological theory is far from the perfect process described previously.

In addition to critiquing the work of individual theorists, the critics have also attacked the general state of sociological theory. In the past, like many other academic disciplines, sociological theory has been organized around a series of canonical texts. This **sociological canon** is made up of those theories, ideas, and books that are considered to be the most important in the field of sociology. Critics have pointed out that the canon is not necessarily a neutral or unbiased creation. It has favored some kinds of social theory over others. Thus, the best theories are not necessarily the ones that survive, become influential, and are covered in books like this one. They contend that sociological theory is not unlike the rest of the social world—it is affected by a wide range of political factors. What does and does not

sociological theory–A set of interrelated ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge of the social world, the explanation of that world, and predictions about the future of that world.

sociological canon–The theories, ideas, and texts that at least in the past, have been considered the most important in the field of sociology. Critics have argued that the canon is not a neutral construction; rather, it is affected by political factors.

come to be seen as important theory (as part of the canon) is the result of a series of political processes:

1. The work of those who studied with the acknowledged masters of sociological theory—people (historically, men) who came to occupy leadership positions within the discipline—is likely to be seen as more important than the work of those who lacked notable and powerful mentors.
2. Works reflecting particular political orientations are more likely to become part of the canon than those done from other perspectives. Thus, in the not-too-distant past in sociology, politically conservative theories (e.g., structural functionalism; see Chapter 4) were more likely to win acceptance than those that were radical from a political point of view (e.g., theories done from a Marxian perspective; see, especially, Chapter 5).
3. Theories that lead to clear hypotheses that can be tested empirically are more likely to be accepted, at least by mainstream sociologists, than those that produce grand, untestable points of view.
4. Theories produced by majority group members (i.e., white males) are more likely to become part of the canon than those created by minorities. Thus, the works of black theoreticians have rarely become part of the canon (for one exception, see the discussion of Du Bois in Chapter 3). The same has been true, at least until recently, of the work of female theorists (see Chapter 8). The theoretical ideas of those associated with cultural minorities (e.g., members of the LGBTQ+ community) have encountered a similar fate.

Thus, sociological theory has not, in fact, always operated in anything approaching the ideal manner described earlier in this chapter. However, in recent decades there has been growing awareness of the gap between the ideal and the real. As a result, a number of perspectives that previously were denied entry into the heart of sociological theory have come to attain a central position within the field. Thus, Marx's theory (see Chapter 2) and a variety of neo-Marxian theories (Chapter 5) have become part of the canon. Similarly, feminist theory and queer theory have become powerful presences, as reflected in Chapters 8 and 10 of this book. Finally, although sociologists have for a long time conducted research on questions of race and racism, it is only in recent years that sociological theories about processes such racialization and colonization (see Chapter 9) have become important to social theory.

This expansion of the sociological canon has also influenced the ways in which sociologists define theory. For example, in the past theory was often thought of in scientific terms, as the description of laws of social behavior. From this perspective, it was possible to use the scientific method to develop broad,

universal theories that could be applied to explain and predict the behavior of all people, irrespective of their unique histories and life circumstances. This is sometimes referred to as the positivist approach to science and theory. Although this approach continues to shape some contemporary theories (see, e.g., the discussion of exchange theory and rational choice theory in Chapter 6), the perspectives that are newer to the canon frequently challenge the assumptions of traditional theory and theory creation. For example, standpoint theorists (Chapter 8), queer theorists (Chapter 10), some postmodern theorists (Chapter 10), and Indigenous theorists (Chapter 9) often

- reject universalistic theories and focus on theories that reflect local, experience-based accounts of social life;
- develop theories that take into account the perspectives of those without power;
- seek to change social structure, culture, for the betterment of all persons but especially those on the periphery of society;
- try to disrupt not only the social world but also the intellectual world, seeking to make it far more open and diverse;
- exhibit a critical edge, both self-critical and critical of other theories and, most important, the social world; and
- recognize that their work is limited by the particular historical, social, and cultural contexts in which they happen to live.

In other words, alongside a range of more traditional approaches to theory, the current canon includes perspectives that regularly question the foundations of knowledge creation. These perspectives encourage theorists to ask: How are ideas and theories made? Who makes these theories? Whose point of view do these theories represent? The goal is to develop sociological theories that address the diversity of experiences and social forms that make up the contemporary world.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Although this book is primarily about contemporary sociological theory, no single date can be named as the point of separation between clearly classical sociological theory and contemporary sociological theory, and no particular characteristics can be said to separate the two definitively. Nonetheless, we can take as the starting point of classical sociological theory the early 1800s, when Auguste Comte, the French social thinker who coined the term *sociology* (in 1839), began theorizing sociologically. (By the way, thinkers long before that time, in both Western and

non-Western cultures, developed idea systems that had many elements in common with sociological theory; see, e.g., the discussion of Ibn Khaldun in Chapter 9.) The 1920s and 1930s mark the close of the classical period. By that time virtually all the great classical thinkers had passed from the scene, and new theorists were beginning to replace them. Thus, the beginnings of the contemporary theories discussed in this book can be traced back many decades, although most were produced in the last half of the 20th century and remain important, and continue to be developed, in the early years of the 21st century.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the major theories and theorists of sociology's classical age—roughly the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chapter 2 covers three thinkers—Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber—who are often acknowledged as the major figures in the history of sociological theory. Chapter 3 begins with a theorist—Georg Simmel—who is often included with the other three in the pantheon of classic theorists. This chapter also deals with three American thinkers, each of whom adds a unique focus to classical theory (Durkheim was French; Marx, Weber, and Simmel were German). Thorstein Veblen, like the others mentioned to this point, had a broad social theory. His theorizing has received increasing recognition in recent years for the fact that whereas all of the above focused on issues related to production, he also concerned himself with, and foresaw, the increasing importance of consumption (especially in his famous idea of "conspicuous consumption") in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Unlike the other theorists addressed to this point, George Herbert Mead focused more on everyday life and less on broad social phenomena and social changes. Finally, W. E. B. Du Bois was an African American sociologist. He argued that race and racism were the most important problems facing the 20th century and constructed a social theory that explained the significance of race for social life. His ideas also anticipate those now addressed by theorists working in the area of critical theories of race and racism.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift the focus to our main concern with contemporary sociological theories. These two chapters deal with contemporary grand theories (as contrasted to the contemporary theories of everyday life, discussed in Chapter 6). A **grand theory** is defined as a vast, highly ambitious effort to tell the story of a great stretch of human history and/or a large portion of the social world. In fact, all of the theorists discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 can be seen as doing grand theory. However, our focus in Chapters 4 and 5 is more contemporary grand theories. In Chapter 4 we deal with two of the best-known contemporary theories—structural functionalism and conflict theory—along with systems theory, a perspective developed by a contemporary German thinker, Niklas Luhmann. Chapter 5 deals with both another well-known contemporary theory, neo-Marxian theory, and

grand theory–A vast, highly ambitious effort to tell the story of a great stretch of human history and/or a large portion of the social world.

three of the more specific contemporary efforts at grand theory: the civilizing process (Norbert Elias), the colonization of the lifeworld (Jürgen Habermas), and the juggernaut of modernity (Anthony Giddens).

Whereas Chapters 4 and 5 deal with grand theories involving large-scale structures and changes, Chapter 6 focuses on the major contemporary varieties of **theories of everyday life**: symbolic interactionism (building heavily on the work of Mead discussed in Chapter 3), dramaturgy (especially the contributions of Erving Goffman), ethnomethodology (shaped most heavily by Harold Garfinkel), exchange theory (with a focus on the contributions of George Homans), and rational choice theory (especially that of James Coleman).

In Chapter 7 we address the major efforts to integrate the kinds of large-scale concerns discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 with the everyday (small-scale) issues that are the focus of Chapter 6. We start with the efforts to create an exchange theory that goes beyond the micro-issues covered in Chapter 6 to integrate more macro-level issues (primarily in the work of Richard Emerson). We then move on to a series of more encompassing integrative efforts, including structuration theory (Anthony Giddens's most general theoretical contribution to sociology), an attempt to integrate culture and agency (Margaret Archer), and Pierre Bourdieu's ambitious integration of what he calls habitus and field.

Many of the concerns detailed in Chapter 7 are evident in Chapter 8 (authored by Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge) on feminist theory, but that theory is so wide-ranging, involves so many thinkers, and is so important that it requires a chapter to itself. Four broad types of contemporary feminist theories are covered in the chapter: theories of gender difference, gender inequality, gender oppression, and structural oppression.

Chapter 9 introduces theories of race and colonialism. This chapter introduces theories that describe the central role that race has played in the development of modern societies. To provide context for the development of the concept of race, we start by discussing colonialism. First, we look at Frantz Fanon's work on colonial consciousness and anticolonial movements; we then turn to postcolonial theory, in particular Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Next, we address specific theories of race and racism, such as critical race theory, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's social constructionist theory of racial formation, and Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond's theory of the racial order. The chapter ends with a review of theories developed by Indigenous scholars and theorists from the Global South. In contrast to most of the theories covered in this book, which are based on Western knowledges, these theories are based in the lived experiences and knowledges of Indigenous peoples.

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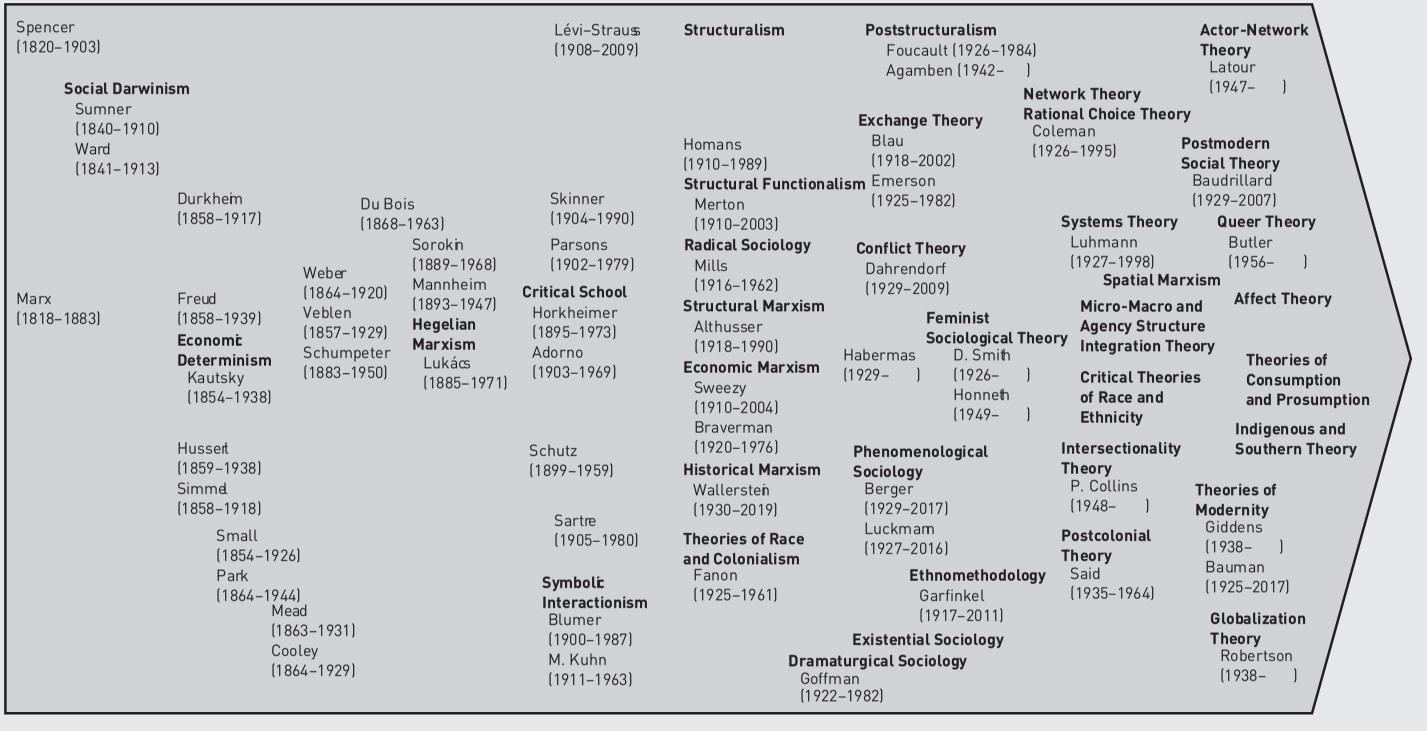
theories of everyday life–Theories that focus on such everyday and seemingly mundane activities as individual thought and action, the interaction of two or more people, and the small groups that emerge from such interaction.

Figure 1.1 Sociological Theory: A Chronology



Source: Author created

Chapter 10 deals with some of the most exciting theoretical developments of the late 20th century, grouped under the heading of postmodern grand theories. Included here is Daniel Bell's work on the transition from industrial to postindustrial society, Michel Foucault's thinking on increasing governmentality, Zygmunt Bauman's work on postmodernity as the coming of age of modernity, the interrelated work of Jean Baudrillard on the rise of consumer society, and George Ritzer on the new means (or cathedrals) of consumption, and finally a section on queer theory that includes discussion of important queer theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler.

Chapter 11 deals with a theory of particular importance for an understanding of the late 20th and early 21st centuries—globalization theory. We begin by looking at the thinking of several important contemporary theorists on globalization—Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to three broad types of theorizing about globalization. The first is cultural theory, which itself is subdivided into three subtypes. Cultural differentialism sees lasting, if not eternal, differences among cultures that are little affected by globalization. A major example of this approach is Samuel Huntington's work on civilizations. Cultural convergence focuses on areas in which cultures are becoming increasingly alike. We use Ritzer's work on McDonaldization as a global force and the increasing "globalization of nothing" to exemplify this approach. Finally, cultural hybridization sees globalization as characterized by unique mixtures of the global and the local. Arjun Appadurai's work on globalization in general, and especially his thinking on disjunctures among what he calls "landscapes," is a good and important example of this approach. The second type of theorizing about globalization is economic theory. Although there is a wide array of work under this heading, the focus here is on neoliberalism as well as on two neo-Marxian approaches—Leslie Sklair on transnational capitalism and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on empire—that represent critiques of neoliberalism and alternatives to it. Finally, we discuss political approaches to globalization with a special focus on the decline of the nation-state in the global age.

Chapter 12 looks at theories that address the relationships among society, technology, and nature. It also considers how contemporary theorists are using ideas from the natural sciences to develop their ideas about society. Although historically sociologists have drawn on evolutionary theories, in recent years social theorists have engaged with systems theories, neuroscience, climate science, and other natural science disciplines. In this chapter we look at some of the most prominent among these perspectives. Affect theory is an outgrowth of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Poststructuralism and postmodernism emphasize the role that language and culture have played in constructing society. Although they share many of the assumptions of the earlier poststructuralists, affect theorists also describe the role that biological bodily energies (affect) play in the construction of social life. This chapter also talks about science and technology studies, especially the work of actor-network theorist Bruno Latour and feminist science

studies scholar Donna Haraway. Both of these theorists point out that science and technology play central roles in the organization of contemporary social life. In particular they share the view that societies are constructed not only through relationships among humans, but also through relationships between humans and nonhumans (animals, technology, natural objects, etc.). The final section of this chapter introduces one of the newest developments in social theory—theories of the Anthropocene. The Anthropcene is a term used to describe a new geological era in which human societies have an unprecedented impact on planetary ecosystems. Sociologists and social theorists consider how this development affects our understanding of what society is, especially how we conceive of our relationship to nature.

SUMMARY

1. We all theorize, but a number of characteristics distinguish the theorizing of sociologists from that of laypeople.
2. The issues of interest to sociological theorists are usually of great personal *and* social concern.
3. Every aspect of the social world, from the most exalted to the most mundane, can be the subject of social theory.
4. Social thinkers may focus on particular behaviors because they find them important and interesting, but they also may do so because these behaviors offer them points of entry into the larger social world.
5. The theories discussed in this book have a number of characteristics in common, including having stood the test of time and having a wide range of applicability, dealing with centrally important social issues, and being created by sociologists or those who have come to be defined as important by sociologists.
6. Sociological theory may be formally defined as a set of interrelated ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge of the social world, the explanation of that world, and predictions about the future of that world. It must be acknowledged, however, that few theories measure up to this definition fully.
7. Although there is an idealized image of the way in which sociological theory operates (e.g., the best ideas become part of the canon), the fact is that reality is different and political factors play critical roles in theory.

8. Criticisms of the ideal model and revelations about the real world of sociological theory have made it possible for a number of perspectives that were previously marginalized (e.g., Marxian, feminist, and queer theories) to gain attention and even become part of the canon.

9. This book deals with contemporary sociological theory (and its classical roots) under several general headings: classical theories, grand theories (including postmodern), theories of everyday life, integrative theories, feminist theories, theories of race and colonialism, theories of globalization, and theories of science technology and society.

SUGGESTED READINGS

SYED FARID ALATAS and VINEETA SINHA. *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. A set of essays about classical theorists and theories from a wider set of backgrounds than is typically represented in mainstream textbooks, including essays about women theorists (Martineau, Nightengale, Sarswati) and essays about theories developed by scholars from North Africa (Ibn Khaldun), the Philippines (Rizal), and India (Sarkar).

GEORGE RITZER, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. 2 vols. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005. The first full encyclopedia of social theory that covers most of the major topics and theorists, both classical and contemporary. The entries are written by well-known experts from around the world.

GEORGE RITZER and BARRY SMART, eds. *The Handbook of Social Theory*. London: Sage, 2001. A compendium of essays dealing with many of the most important people and issues in the history of social theory.

GEORGE RITZER and JEFFREY STEPNISKY, eds. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*. 2 vols. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. A collection of 41 essays on leading classical and contemporary theorists authored by widely recognized scholars.

GEORGE RITZER and JEFFREY STEPNISKY *Sociological Theory*. 10th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018. Deals with classical and contemporary sociological theory much more widely and in greater detail than this volume.

MARY ROGERS, ed. *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996. Includes many examples of, and original contributions to, theories from a diversity of cultural backgrounds.

STEVEN SEIDMAN *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory Today*. 6th ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017. Most recent edition of an influential sociological theory textbook. Covers theories from the traditional sociology canon but also excels in its presentation of critical theoretical perspectives.

A. JAVIER TREVIÑO, ed. *The Development of Sociological Theory: Readings From the Enlightenment to the Present*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017. A cutting-edge collection of original writings, from diverse perspectives, by classical and contemporary theorists.

CHAPTER TWO

CLASSICAL THEORIES I

The early giants of social theory are noted for their creation of grand theories, theories that as defined in Chapter 1, are vast, highly ambitious efforts to tell the story of great stretches of social history and/or large expanses of the social world. These theories of history generally culminate, in their authors' times, with descriptions of a society that although it has made progress, is beset with problems. The creators of such theories usually offer ideas about how to solve those problems and thereby create a better society.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM: FROM MECHANICAL TO ORGANIC SOLIDARITY

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) built on the work of the French social theorist Auguste Comte, but he became a far more important figure than Comte in the history of theory. In fact, at least some observers consider Durkheim *the* most important theorist in the history of sociology. To this day, many forms of sociological theorizing bear the stamp of his thinking.

Two Types of Solidarity

Durkheim's grand theory involves a concern for the historical transformation of societies from more primitive mechanical forms to more modern organic ones. What differentiates these two types of societies is the source of their solidarity, or what holds them together. The key here is the division of labor.

In **mechanical solidarity**, society is held together by the fact that virtually everyone does essentially the same things (gathering fruits and vegetables, hunting animals). In other words, there is little division of labor in primitive society, and this fact holds society together. In contrast, in more modern **organic solidarity** a substantial division of labor has occurred, and people perform increasingly specialized tasks. Thus, some may make shoes, others may bake bread, and still others may raise children. Solidarity here comes from differences; that is, individuals need the contributions of an increasing number of people to function and even to survive.

Durkheim envisioned a historical transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity. This idea is clearly different from Comte's model of social change. Comte thought in terms of changes in ideas, in the way people seek to explain what transpires in the world; Durkheim dealt with changes in the material world, specifically in the ways in which we divide and do our work.

Changes in Dynamic Density

What causes the change from mechanical to organic solidarity? Durkheim's answer is that the transformation results from an increase in the **dynamic density** of society. Dynamic density has two components. The first is simply the sheer number of people in society. However, an increase in the number of people is not enough on its own to induce a change in the division of labor because individuals and small groups of people can live in relative isolation from one another and continue to be jacks-of-all-trades. That is, even in societies with large populations, each individual can continue to do most of the required tasks. Thus, a second factor is necessary for dynamic density to increase and lead to changes in the division of labor: there must be an increase in the amount of interaction that takes place among the people in society. When increasingly large numbers of people interact with greater frequency, dynamic density is likely to increase to the point that a transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity occurs.

What is it about an increase in dynamic density that leads to the need for a different division of labor? With more people, there is greater competition for scarce resources, such as land, game, and fruits and vegetables. If everyone competes for everything, there is great disorder and conflict. With an increased division of labor in which some people are responsible for one of these things and other people are responsible for other things, there is likely to be less conflict and more harmony. Perhaps more important is the fact that greater specialization

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mechanical solidarity–In Durkheimian theory, the idea that primitive society is held together by the fact that there is little division of labor, and as a result, virtually everyone does essentially the same things.

organic solidarity–To Durkheim, the idea that because of the substantial division of labor in modern society, solidarity comes from differences; that is, individuals need the contributions of an increasing number of people to function and even to survive.

dynamic density–The number of people in a society and their frequency of interaction. An increase in dynamic density leads to the transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity (Durkheim).

in performing specific tasks makes for greater efficiency and ultimately greater productivity. Thus, with an increased division of labor, more of everything can be produced for an expanding population. Greater peace and prosperity are the results, or at least that is what Durkheim contends.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)

A Biographical Vignette

Durkheim is most often thought of today as a political conservative, and his influence within sociology certainly has been a conservative one. But in his time, he was considered a liberal. This was exemplified by the active public role he played in the defense of French army captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish man whose court-martial for treason in the late 19th century was felt by many to be based on anti-Semitic sentiments in some sectors of French society.

Durkheim was deeply offended by the Dreyfus affair, particularly its anti-Semitism. But he did not attribute this anti-Semitism to racism among the French people. Characteristically, he saw it as a symptom of the moral sickness confronting French society as a whole. He said,

> When society undergoes suffering, it feels the need to find someone whom it can hold responsible for its sickness, on whom it can avenge its misfortunes; and those against whom public opinion already discriminates are naturally designated for this role. These are the pariahs who serve as expiatory victims. What confirms me in this interpretation is the way in which the result of Dreyfus's trial was greeted in 1894. There was a surge of joy in the boulevards. People celebrated as a triumph what should have been a cause for public mourning. At least they knew whom to blame for the economic troubles and moral distress in which they lived. The trouble came from the Jews. The charge had been officially proved. By this very fact alone, things already seemed to be getting better and people felt consoled.

Thus, Durkheim's interest in the Dreyfus affair stemmed from his deep and lifelong interest in morality and the moral crisis confronting modern society.

To Durkheim, the answer to the Dreyfus affair and crises like it lay in ending the moral disorder in society. Because that could not be done quickly or easily, Durkheim suggested more specific actions, such as severe repression of those who incite hatred of others and government efforts to show the public how it is being misled. He urged people to "have the courage to proclaim aloud what they think, and to unite together in order to achieve victory in the struggle against public madness."

Source: Steve Lukes, Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) pp. 345, 347.

Collective Conscience

Another important aspect of Durkheim's argument about the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is that it is accompanied by a dramatic change in what he called the **collective conscience**, the ideas shared by the members of a group, tribe, or society. These ideas are collective in the sense that no one individual knows or possesses all of them; only the entire collection of individuals has full knowledge and possession of them.

The collective conscience in mechanical solidarity is different from that in organic solidarity. In mechanical solidarity and the small, undifferentiated societies associated with it, the collective conscience affects everyone and is of great significance to them. People care deeply about collective ideas. Furthermore, the ideas are powerful, and people are likely to act in accord with them. The ideas are also rigid, and they tend to be associated with religion.

In contrast, in organic solidarity and the large, differentiated societies linked with it, fewer people are affected by the collective conscience. In other words, more people are able to evade the ideas partially or completely. The collective conscience is not as important, and most people do not seem to care about it deeply. It is far weaker and does not exercise nearly as much control over people. The collective conscience is far more flexible and adaptable and less associated with anything we think of as religion.

For example, in a primitive society with mechanical solidarity, people might feel deeply about being involved in group activities, including the selection of a new leader. If one member does not participate, everyone will know, and difficulties will arise for that person in the group. However, in a modern society characterized by organic solidarity, the feeling about such political participation (e.g., voting) is not nearly as strong. People are urged to vote, but there is not much strength of conviction involved, and in any case the fact that some do not vote is likely to escape the view of their neighbors.

Law: Repressive and Restitutive

How do we know whether there has been a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity? From a strong to a weak collective conscience? Durkheim argued that we can observe these changes in a transformation in the law. Mechanical solidarity tends to be characterized by **repressive law**. This is a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the powerful collective conscience. The theft of a

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collective conscience–The ideas shared by the members of a collectivity such as a group, a tribe, or a society (Durkheim).

repressive law–Characteristic of mechanical solidarity, a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the powerful collective conscience (Durkheim).

pig might lead to the thief's hands being cut off. Blaspheming against the community's God or gods might result in the removal of the blasphemer's tongue. Because people are so involved in the moral system, offenses against it are likely to be met with swift, severe punishments. These reactions are evidence that repressive law is in place, and such law is, in turn, a material reflection of the existence of a strong collective conscience and a society held together by mechanical solidarity.

As we have seen, over time mechanical solidarity gives way to organic solidarity and a progressive weakening of the collective conscience. The indicator of a weak collective conscience, of the existence of organic solidarity, is **restitutive law**. Instead of being severely punished for even seemingly minor offenses against the collective morality, individuals in this more modern type of society are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions. Thus, one who steals a pig might be required to work for a certain number of hours on the farm from which the pig was stolen, pay a fine, or repay society by spending a brief period in jail. This is obviously a far milder reaction than having one's hands cut off for such an offense. The reason is that the collectivity is not deeply and emotionally invested in the common morality ("Thou shalt not steal") that stands behind such a law. Rather, officials (the police, court officers) are delegated the legal responsibility to be sure the law and, ultimately, the morality are enforced. The collectivity can distance itself from the whole thing with the knowledge that it is being handled by paid and/or elected officials.

More extremely, something like blaspheming against God is likely to go unnoticed and unpunished in modern societies. Having a far weaker collective conscience, believing little in religion, people in general are likely to react weakly or not all to a blasphemer. And officials, busy with far greater problems, such as drug abuse, rape, and murder, are unlikely to pay any attention at all to blasphemy, even if there are laws against it.

Anomie

At one level Durkheim seems to be describing and explaining a historical change from one type of solidarity to another. The two types of solidarity merely seem to be different, and one does not seem to be any better or worse than the other. Although mechanical solidarity is not problem free, the problems associated with organic solidarity and how they might be solved concerned Durkheim. Several problems come into existence with organic solidarity, but the one that worried Durkheim most is what he termed *anomie*. Durkheim viewed anomie (and other problems) as a pathology, which implies that it can be cured. In other words, a social theorist like Durkheim was akin to a medical doctor, diagnosing social pathologies and dispensing cures.

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restitutive law—Characteristic of organic solidarity and its weakened collective conscience, a form of law in which offenders are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions (Durkheim).

KEY CONCEPT

Social Facts

Crucial to understanding Durkheim's thinking and the development of modern sociology is his concept of **social facts**. Durkheim developed this idea because he was struggling to separate the then-new discipline of sociology from the existing fields of psychology and philosophy. Whereas philosophers think about abstractions, Durkheim argued, sociologists should treat social facts as things. As such, social facts are to be studied empirically; this practice distinguishes sociologists from philosophers, who merely speculate about abstract issues without venturing into the real world and collecting data on concrete social phenomena. For example, in his book *Suicide*, Durkheim said that the "social suicide rate"—the relative number of people who commit suicide in a given region or occupation—is a social fact. It describes a measureable, overarching pattern in a society.

Durkheim also argued that social facts are external to, and coercive over, individuals. This distinguishes them from the things that psychologists study. Psychologists are concerned with psychological facts that are internal (*not* external) to individuals and are not necessarily coercive over them.

Durkheim distinguished between two types of social facts: material and nonmaterial. **Material social facts** are social facts that are materialized in the external social world. An example is the structure of the classroom in which you are taking the course for which you are reading this book. It is a material reality (you can touch and feel the walls, desks, blackboard), and it is external to you and coercive over you. In terms of the latter, the structure of the room may encourage listening to, and taking notes on, lectures. It also serves to prevent you from, say, playing baseball in the room while a lecture is in process.

Nonmaterial social facts are social facts that are also external and coercive but that do not take a material form. The major examples of nonmaterial social facts in sociology are norms and values. Thus, we are also prevented from playing baseball while a lecture is in progress because of unwritten and widely shared rules about how one is supposed to behave in class. Furthermore, we have learned to put a high value on education with the result that we are reluctant to do anything that would adversely affect it.

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social facts–To Durkheim, the subject matter of sociology. Social facts are to be treated as things that are external to, and coercive over, individuals, and they are to be studied empirically.

material social facts–Social facts that take a material form in the external social world (e.g., architecture) (Durkheim).

nonmaterial social facts–Social facts that are external and coercive but that do not take a material form (e.g., norms and values) (Durkheim).

We can see how a nonmaterial social fact is coercive over us, but in what sense is it also external to us? The answer is that things like the norms and values of society are the shared possessions of the collectivity. Some, perhaps most, of them are internalized in the individual during the socialization process, but no single individual possesses anything approaching all of them. The entire set of norms and values is in the sole possession of the collectivity. In this sense we can say that these nonmaterial social facts are external to us.

To this day, many sociologists concentrate their attention on social facts. However, they rarely use this now-antiquated term. Rather, sociologists focus on social structures and social institutions. However, it has become clear that in his effort to distinguish sociology from psychology and philosophy, Durkheim came up with a much too limited definition of the subject matter of sociology. As we will see, many sociologists study an array of phenomena that would not be considered Durkheimian social facts.

Anomie may be defined as a sense of not knowing what one is expected to do. This is traceable to the decline in the collective conscience in organic solidarity, which means that there are few, if any, clear, strong collective ideas about things. As a result, when confronted with many issues—Should I take that pig that is wandering in the field? Should I blaspheme against God?—people simply do not know what they are supposed to do. More generally, people are adrift in society because they lack clear and secure moorings. This contrasts strongly with mechanical solidarity, in which everyone is aware of what the collectivity believes and what they are supposed to do in any given situation. They have clear and secure moorings; they do *not* suffer from anomie.

KARL MARX: FROM CAPITALISM TO COMMUNISM

The most important and most aesthetically pleasing (because its analyses, conclusions, and remedies for society's ills stem seamlessly from basic premises) theory of the classical age is that of the German social thinker and political activist Karl Marx (1818–1883). This assertion might come as a surprise to readers who have previously come into contact only with critical statements about Marx and his thinking. In the popular view, Marx is some sort of crazed radical who developed a set of ideas that led many nations, especially the Soviet Union, in the direction of disastrous communist regimes. The failures of those societies and the abuses associated with them (e.g., the system of prison camps in the Soviet Union—the Gulag—where millions died) have been blamed on Marx and his ideas. But

anomie–A sense, associated with organic solidarity, of not knowing what one is expected to do, of being adrift in society without any clear and secure moorings (Durkheim).

KEY CONCEPT

Anomic (and Other Types of) Suicide

The concept of anomie plays a central role in Durkheim's famous work *Suicide*, in which he argues that people are more likely to kill themselves when they do not know what is expected of them. In this situation, regulation of people is low, and they are largely free to run wild. This mad pursuit of anything and everything is likely to prove unsatisfying, and as a result, a higher percentage of people in such a situation are apt to commit suicide, specifically **anomic suicide**.

But what causes the rate of anomic suicide to increase? Social disruption is the main cause, but interestingly, we can see an increase in the rate of such suicide in times of both positive and negative disruption. That is, both an economic boom and an economic depression can cause a rise in the rate of anomic suicide. Either positive or negative disruptions can adversely affect the ability of the collectivity to exercise control over the individual. Without such control, people are more likely to feel rootless, not knowing what they are supposed to do in the changing and increasingly strange environment. The unease that this causes leads people to commit anomic suicide at a higher rate than in more stable times.

Anomic suicide is one of four types of suicide Durkheim describes in a broad-ranging theory of this behavior. The others are **egoistic suicide**, which occurs when people are not well integrated into the collectivity. Largely on their own, they feel a sense of futility or meaninglessness, and more of them adopt the view that they are free (morally and otherwise) to choose to do anything, including kill themselves. In **altruistic suicide**, people are too well integrated into the collectivity and kill themselves in greater numbers than they otherwise would because the group leads them, or even forces them, to do so. Finally, **fatalistic suicide** occurs in situations of excessive regulation (e.g., slavery), where people

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anomic suicide–A type of suicide that occurs when people do not know what is expected of them, where regulation is low, and they are largely free to run wild. This mad pursuit is likely to prove unsatisfying, and as a result, a higher percentage of people are apt to commit this type of suicide (Durkheim).

egoistic suicide–A type of suicide that occurs when people are not well integrated into the collectivity and are largely on their own; they feel a sense of futility or meaninglessness, and more of them feel that they are morally free to kill themselves (Durkheim).

altruistic suicide–A type of suicide that occurs when people are too well integrated into the collectivity; they are likely to kill themselves in greater numbers because the group leads them, or even forces them, to do so (Durkheim).

fatalistic suicide–A type of suicide that occurs in situations of excessive regulation (e.g., slavery), where people are often so distressed and depressed by their lack of freedom that they take their own lives more frequently than otherwise (Durkheim).

are so distressed and depressed by their lack of freedom that they take their own lives more frequently than otherwise.

Thus, Durkheim offers a broad theory of suicide based on the degree to which people are regulated by, or integrated into, the collectivity.

although the leaders of those societies invoked Marx's name and called themselves communists, Marx himself would have attacked the kinds of societies they created for their inhumanity. The fact is that what those societies became had little in common with what Marx would have liked a communist society to be.

Human Potential

The starting point for Marx's grand theory is a set of assumptions about the potential of people in the right historical and social circumstances. In capitalistic and precapitalistic societies, people had come nowhere close to their human potential. In precapitalistic societies (say, the Stone Age or the Middle Ages), people were too busy scrambling to find adequate food, shelter, and protection to develop their higher capacities. Although food, shelter, and protection were generally easier to come by in capitalistic societies, the oppressive and exploitative nature of the capitalist system made it impossible for most people to come anywhere close to their potential.

According to Marx, people, unlike lower animals, are endowed with consciousness and the ability to link that consciousness to action. Among other things, people can set themselves apart from what they are doing, plan what they are going to do, choose to act or not to act, choose a specific kind of action, be flexible if impediments get in their way, concentrate on what they are doing for long periods, and often choose to do what they are doing in concert with other people. But people do not only think; they would perish if that were all they did. They must act, and often that involves acting on nature to appropriate from it what people need (raw materials, water, food, shelter) to survive. People appropriated things in earlier societies, but they did so in such primitive and inefficient ways that they were unable to develop their capacities, especially their capacities to think, to any great degree. Under capitalism, people came to care little about expressing their creative capacities in the act of appropriating what they needed from nature. Rather, they focused on owning things and earning enough money to acquire those things. But capitalism was important to Marx because it provided the technological and organizational innovations needed for the creation of a communist society, where for the first time, people would be able to express their full capacities. Under communism, people would be freed from the desire merely to own things and would be able, with the help of technologies and organizations created in capitalism, to live up to their full human potential (what Marx called "species being").

Alienation

The idea that people must appropriate what they need from nature is related to Marx's view that people need to work. Work is a positive process in which people use their creative capacities, and further extend them, in productive activities. However, the work that most people did under capitalism did not permit them to express their human potential. In other words, rather than expressing themselves in their work, people under capitalism were alienated from their work.

One cannot understand what Marx meant by alienation without understanding further what he meant by human potential. In the circumstance (communism) where people achieve their human potential, there is a natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the products they produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and what they are potentially capable of becoming. **Alienation** is the breakdown of these natural interconnections. Instead of being naturally related to all of these things, people are separated from them.

First, under capitalism, instead of choosing their productive activities, people have their activities chosen for them by the owners, the capitalists. The capitalists decide what is to be done and how it is to be done. They offer the workers (in Marx's terminology, the proletariat) a wage, and if the workers accept, they must perform the activities the way they have been designed to be performed by the capitalist. In return, they receive a wage that is supposed to provide them with all the satisfaction and gratification they need. The productive activities are controlled, even owned, by the capitalist. Thus, the workers are separated from those activities and unable to express themselves in them.

Second, capitalists also own the products. The workers do not choose what to produce, and when the products are completed, they do not belong to the workers. The workers are unlikely to use the products to satisfy their basic needs. Instead, the products belong to the capitalists, who may use them, or seek to have them used, in any way they wish. Given the profit orientation that serves to define capitalism, this almost always means that they will endeavor to sell the products for a profit. Once the workers have made the products, they are completely separated from those products and have absolutely no say in what happens to them. Furthermore, the workers may have little sense of their contribution to the final products. They may work on assembly lines, perform specific tasks (e.g., tightening some bolts), and have little idea of what is being produced and how what they are doing fits into the overall process and contributes to the end products.

Third, the workers are likely to be separated from their fellow workers. In Marx's view, people are inherently social and, left to their own devices, would choose to work collaboratively and cooperatively to produce what they need

alienation–The breakdown of and separation from the natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the products they produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and what they are potentially capable of becoming (Marx).

to live. However, under capitalism, the workers, even when surrounded by many other people, perform their tasks alone and repetitively. Those around them are likely to be strangers who are performing similarly isolated tasks. Often the situation is even worse than this: the capitalist frequently pits workers against each other to see who can produce the most for the least amount of pay. Those who succeed keep their jobs, at least for a time, whereas those who fail are likely to find themselves unemployed and on the street. Thus, instead of working together harmoniously, workers are forced to compete with one another in a struggle for survival. Even if they are not engaged in such life-and-death struggles, workers in capitalism are clearly separated from one another.

Finally, instead of expressing their human potential in their work, people are driven further and further from what they have the potential to be. They perform less and less like humans and are reduced to animals, beasts of burden, or inhuman machines. Their consciousness is numbed and ultimately destroyed as their relations with other humans and with nature are progressively severed. The result is a mass of people who are unable to express their essential human qualities, a mass of alienated workers.

Capitalism

Alienation occurs within the context of a capitalist society. As we have seen, **capitalism** is essentially a two-class system in which one class (capitalists) exploits the other (proletariat). The key to understanding both classes lies in what Marx called the **means of production**. As the name suggests, these are the things that are needed for production to take place. Included in the means of production are things such as tools, machinery, raw materials, and factories. Under capitalism, the **capitalists** own the means of production. If the **proletariat** want to work, they must come to the capitalists, who own the means that make most work possible. Workers need access to the means of production to work. They also need money to survive in capitalism, and the capitalists tend to have that too as well as the ability to make more of it. The capitalists have what the proletariat need (the means of production, money for wages), but what do the workers have to offer in return? The workers have something absolutely essential to the capitalists: labor and the time available to perform it. The capitalists cannot produce

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capitalism–An economic system comprising mainly capitalists and the proletariat in which one class (capitalists) exploits the other (proletariat) (Marx).

means of production–Those things that are needed for production to take place (including tools, machinery, raw materials, and factories) (Marx).

capitalists–Those who own the means of production under capitalism and are therefore in a position to exploit workers (Marx).

proletariat–Those who, because they do not own the means of production, must sell their labor time to the capitalists to get access to those means (Marx).

and cannot make more money and profit without the labor of the proletariat. Thus, a deal is struck. The capitalists allow the proletariat access to the means of production, and the proletariat are paid a wage (albeit a small one, as small as the capitalists can possibly get away with). Actually the worker is paid what Marx called a **subsistence wage**, enough for the worker to survive and have a family and children so that when the worker falters, they can be replaced by one of their children. In exchange, the proletariat give the capitalist their labor time and all the productive abilities and capacities associated with that time.

On the surface, this seems like a fair deal: both the capitalist and the proletariat get what they lack and what they need. However, in Marx's view this is a grossly unfair situation. Why is that so? The reason is traceable to another of Marx's famous ideas, the **labor theory of value**. As the name suggests, his idea is

KARL MARX (1818–1883)

A Biographical Vignette

After graduating from the University of Berlin, Marx became a writer for a liberal-radical newspaper and within 10 months had become its editor in chief. However, because of its political positions, the paper was closed shortly thereafter by the government. The essays that Marx published in this period began to reflect a number of the positions that would guide him throughout his life. They were liberally sprinkled with democratic principles, humanism, and youthful idealism. He rejected the abstractness of philosophy, the naive dreaming of utopian communists, and the arguments of activists who were urging what he considered to be premature political action. In rejecting these activists, Marx laid the groundwork for his own life's work:

> Practical attempts, even by the masses, can be answered with a cannon as soon as they become dangerous, but ideas that have overcome our intellect and conquered our conviction, ideas to which reason has riveted our conscience, are chains from which one cannot break loose without breaking one's heart; they are demons that one can only overcome by submitting to them.

Source: "Communism and the Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung," in D. McLellan (ed), Karl Marx: Selected Writings (New York: OUP, 1844/1972), p. 20.

subsistence wage–The wage paid by the capitalist to the proletariat that is enough for the worker to survive and have a family and children so that when the worker falters, they can be replaced by one of their children (Marx).

labor theory of value–Marx's theory that *all* value comes from labor and is therefore traceable, in capitalism, to the proletariat.

KEY CONCEPT

Exploitation

To Marx, capitalism, by its nature, leads to exploitation, particularly of the proletariat, or working class. His thinking on exploitation is derived from his labor theory of value and more specifically the concept of **surplus value**, defined as the difference between the value of a product when it is sold and the value of the elements (including workerslabor) consumed in its production. Surplus value, like all value from the perspective of the labor theory of value, comes from the workers. It should go to the workers, but in the capitalist system the lion's share of the value goes to the capitalists. The degree to which the capitalists retain surplus value and use it to their own ends (including, and especially, expansion of their capitalist businesses) is the degree to which capitalism is an exploitative system. In a colorful metaphor, Marx describes capitalists as "vampires" who suck the labor of the proletariat. Furthermore, the more proletariat "blood" the capitalists suck, the bigger, more successful, and wealthier they will become. In capitalism, the deserving (the proletariat) grow poorer, while the undeserving (the capitalists) grow immensely wealthy.

that *all* value comes from labor. The proletariat labor; the capitalist does not. The capitalist might invest, plan, manage, scheme, and so on, but to Marx this is not labor. Marx's sense of labor is the production of things out of the raw materials provided by nature. The proletariat and only the proletariat do that, although under capitalism the raw materials are provided by the capitalist and not directly by nature. To put it baldly, because the proletariat labor and the capitalist does not, the proletariat deserve virtually everything and the capitalist almost nothing.

Of course, the situation in a capitalistic society is exactly the reverse: the capitalist gets the lion's share of the rewards and the workers get barely enough to subsist. Thus (and this is another of Marx's famous concepts), the proletariat are the victims of **exploitation**. Ironically, neither capitalist nor worker is conscious of this exploitation. Both are the victims of **false consciousness**. Marx believed that it is possible for people to be unaware of the forces that determine their social

surplus value–The difference between the value of a product when it is sold and the value of the elements (including workerslabor) consumed in its production (Marx).

exploitation–The nature of the relationship between capitalists and workers in capitalism, where the capitalists get the lion's share of the rewards and the proletariat get only enough to subsist, even though based on the labor theory of value, the situation should be reversed (Marx).

false consciousness–The inaccurate sense of themselves that both proletariat and capitalists have under capitalism regarding their relationship to each other and the way in which capitalism operates (Marx).

CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

Does Marx's Theory Have Any Relevance to a Postcommunist World?

When the Soviet Union and its allies began to fall in the late 1980s, some observers believed not only that communism had failed but also that Marx's theory, on which that system was ostensibly based, would finally, once and for all, be relegated to the dustbin of disproven and dishonored theories. Indeed, in the early 1990s there was much talk of the end of Marxian theory. Yet Marx's theory, as well as the many neo-Marxian theories derived from it, not only survives in the early 21st century but is also considered by many scholars to be more relevant and useful than ever.

The fact is that Marx did little or no theorizing about communism. Rather, he was a theorist of capitalism, and it is clear that with the demise of Soviet communism (and the transformation of Chinese communism into a vibrant capitalist economy coexisting with a communist state), capitalism is freer than it has been in 100 years (since the birth of Soviet communism in 1917), if not in its entire history, to roam the world and intrude itself into every nook and cranny of that world.

From 1917 to 1989 the expansion of capitalism was limited by communism in various ways. First, many countries in the world, including some of the biggest and most important, were communist or were allied with the communist bloc. As a result, capitalist businesses found it impossible, or at least difficult, to establish themselves in those parts of the world. Second, the global conflict between capitalism and communism, especially the U.S.–Soviet Cold War, which began shortly after the close of World War II, inhibited the development and global spread of capitalism. For one thing, the huge expenditures on the military and military flare-ups associated with those periods in which the Cold War heated considerably (e.g., the wars in Korea and Vietnam) sapped resources that could have been devoted to the expansion of capitalism.

With communism fast becoming a dim memory (except in Cuba and, at least rhetorically, in China), capitalism has been freed of many of its global restraints and is rampaging through the world. This is most obvious in the former communist countries that have become prime territory for capitalist expansionism. Western capitalists have rushed into the old Soviet bloc and established a strong presence, whereas in China they have done the same, even as a strong indigenous capitalism has developed. Indeed, the question now is not whether China will replace the United States as the leading capitalist country but *when* that transformation will take place.

Marx foresaw that capitalism not only would but must become a global phenomenon. Capitalist businesses now, much more than in Marx's day, must

expand or die. Thus, they must ceaselessly seek new markets as old markets grow less able to produce ever-expanding business and profits. Marx's prediction was prevented from coming to full fruition in the 20th century because of the global conflict between communism and capitalism (as well as other factors, such as two devastating world wars). However, in the past two decades the global proliferation predicted by Marx has occurred with a vengeance.

What this all means is that Marx's ideas are more relevant today than ever before to the analysis of capitalism, especially global capitalism. Not only has capitalism spread around the world, but we are now increasingly facing the kinds of crises that Marx anticipated would accompany capitalism's expansion. These include growing levels of global inequality, a disappearing middle-class, financial crises such as the recent worldwide recession, and environmental threats. At the same time, global social movements have emerged to challenge capitalism. In fact, some of the most important works in globalization theory these days emanate from a Marxian perspective (see Chapter 11). That is not to say that Marx's ideas are sacrosanct. Many of them are dubious, even downright wrong, and contemporary Marxian theorists need to amend, adapt, or abandon those ideas. Indeed, that is what many of those thinkers are doing. Nonetheless, they take as their starting point Marx's theoretical ideas on capitalism and build on them to gain insight into the global success of capitalism in the wake of the failure of communism.

To answer the question posed in the title of this box, Marx's ideas are, if anything, *more* relevant today than ever!

positions. Even though the proletariat suffer under capitalism, they are unaware of the reasons for that suffering, or at least they have a false understanding of the sources of that suffering. The workers think they are getting a fair day's pay. The capitalists think that they are being rewarded not because of their exploitation of the workers but for their cleverness, their capital investment, their manipulation of the market, and so on. The capitalists are too busy making more money ever to form a true understanding of the exploitative nature of their relationship with workers. However, the proletariat do have the capacity to achieve such an understanding, partly because eventually they are so exploited and impoverished that the reality of what is transpiring in capitalism is no longer hidden from them. In Marx's terms, the proletariat are capable of achieving **class consciousness**; the capitalists are not.

Class consciousness is prerequisite to revolution. The proletariat must understand the source of their exploitation before they can rise up against capitalism. However, the coming revolution is aided by the dynamics of capitalism. In other

class consciousness–The ability of a class, in particular the proletariat, to overcome false consciousness and attain an accurate understanding of the capitalist system.

words, for a revolution to occur, the proper material conditions must be in place *and* the proletariat must understand that they can create a better world through their own actions. For example, capitalism grows more competitive, prices are slashed, and an increasing number of capitalists are driven out of business and into the proletariat. Eventually, the proletariat swells while the capitalist class is reduced to a small number who maintain their position because of their skill at exploitation. When the massive proletariat finally achieve class consciousness and decide to act, there will be no contest because the capitalists will be so few that they are likely to be easily brushed aside, perhaps with little or no violence.

Thus, capitalism will not be destroyed and communism will not be created without the proletariat taking action. In Marx's terms, the proletariat must engage in **praxis**, or concrete action. It is not enough to think about the evils of capitalism or develop great theories of it and its demise; people must take to the streets and make it happen. This does not necessarily mean that they must behave in violent ways, but it does mean they cannot sit back and wait for capitalism to collapse on its own.

Communism

Marx had no doubt that the dynamics of capitalism would lead to such a revolution, but he devoted little time to describing the character of the communist society that would replace capitalism. To Marx, the priority was gaining an understanding of the way capitalism works and communicating that understanding to the proletariat, thereby helping them gain class consciousness. He was critical of the many thinkers who spent their time daydreaming about some future utopian society. The immediate goal was the overthrow of the alienating and exploitative system. What was to come next would have to be dealt with once the revolution succeeded. Some say that this lack of a plan laid the groundwork for the debacles that took place in the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Marx did have some specific things to say about the future state of communism, but we get a better sense of communism by returning to his basic assumptions about human potential. In a sense, **communism** is *the* social system that permits, for the first time, the expression of full human potential. In effect, communism is an anti-system, a world in which the system is nothing more than the social relations among the people who make up the system. Marx did discuss a transitional phase after the fall of capitalism, when there would be larger structures (e.g., the dictatorship of the proletariat), but that was to be short-lived and replaced by what he considered true communism. (The experience in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution indicates the naïveté of this view and the fact that it may be impossible to eliminate the larger structures that exploit and alienate people.)

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praxis–Concrete action, particularly that taken by the proletariat to overcome capitalism (Marx).

communism–The social system that permits, for the first time, the expression of full human potential (Marx).

Thus, communism is a system that permits people to express the thoughtfulness, creativity, and sociability that have always been part of their nature but have been inhibited or destroyed by previous social systems (e.g., feudalism, capitalism). Communist society would utilize and expand upon the technological and organizational innovations of capitalism, but otherwise it would get out of people's way and allow them to be what they always could have been, at least potentially.

MAX WEBER: THE RATIONALIZATION OF SOCIETY

If Karl Marx is the most important thinker from the point of view of social thought in general, as well as from the perspective of political developments of the last 100-plus years, then his fellow German theorist Max Weber (1864–1920) is arguably the most important theorist from the perspective of sociology (the other possibility is Émile Durkheim). Weber was a complex thinker who made many contributions to social thought, but his best-known contribution is his theory of the increasing rationalization of the West. That theory is based on Weber's work on action, especially rational action.

Social Action

For many years, Weber's work on social action was the center of attention, rather than his theory of rationalization, which is now seen as the heart of his theoretical orientation. The focus on social action is traceable to the work of Talcott Parsons, who, in the 1930s, introduced classical European theory in general, and Weberian theory in particular, to a large American audience. However, he did so with a number of now widely recognized biases. One of those biases was his own action theory, which led him to accentuate the importance of Weber's thinking on action (which played a central role in the creation of Parsons's own perspective).

Behavior and Action

Weber's thinking on action is based on an important distinction in all sociologies of everyday life (see Chapter 6), that between behavior and action. Both behavior and action involve what people do on an everyday basis, but **behavior** occurs with little or no thought, whereas **action** is the result of conscious processes. Behavior is closely tied to an approach, largely associated with psychology, known as **behaviorism**, which has played an important role in the development of many sociologies of everyday life. It focuses on situations where a stimulus is

behavior–Things that people do that require little or no thought.

action–Things that people do that are the result of conscious processes.

behaviorism–The study, largely associated with psychology, of behavior.

applied and a behavior results, more or less mechanically, with little or no thought process intervening between stimulus and response. For example, you engage in behavior when you pull your hand away from a hot stove or automatically put up your umbrella when it starts raining.

Weber was *not* concerned with such behavior; his focus was on action in which thought intervenes between stimulus and response. In other words, Weber was interested in situations in which people attach meaning to what they do: what they do is meaningful to them. In contrast, behavior is meaningless, at least in the sense that people simply do it without giving it much or any thought. Weber defined sociology as the study of action in terms of its subjective meaning. What matters are people's conscious processes. Furthermore, what people believe about a situation in which they find themselves is more important for an understanding of the actions they take than the objective situation.

At a theoretical level, Weber was interested in the action of a single individual, but he was far more interested in the actions of two or more individuals. Sociology was to devote most of its attention to the regularities in the actions of two or more individuals. In fact, although Weber talked about collectivities (e.g., Calvinists, capitalists), he argued that they must be treated solely as the result of the actions of two or more people. Only people can act, and thus sociology must focus on actors, not collectivities. Sociologists may talk about collectivities, but that is only for the sake of convenience. A collectivity is nothing more than a set of individual actors and actions.

MAX WEBER (1864–1920)

A Biographical Vignette

Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Germany, on April 21, 1864, into a decidedly middle-class family. Important differences between his parents had a profound effect on both his intellectual orientation and his psychological development. His father was a bureaucrat who rose to a relatively important political position. He was clearly a part of the political establishment and as a result eschewed any activity or idealism that would require personal sacrifice or threaten his position within the system.

In addition, the senior Weber was a man who enjoyed earthly pleasures, and in this and many other ways, he stood in sharp contrast to his wife. Max Weber's mother was a devout Calvinist, a woman who sought to lead an ascetic life largely devoid of the pleasures craved by her husband. Her concerns were more otherworldly; she was disturbed by the imperfections that were signs that she was not destined for salvation. These deep differences between the parents led to marital tension, and both the differences and the tension had an immense impact on Weber.

Because it was impossible for him to emulate both parents, Weber was presented with a clear choice as a child. He first seemed to opt for his father's orientation to life, but later he drew closer to his mother's approach. Whatever the choice, the tension produced by the need to choose between such polar opposites negatively affected Weber's psyche.

During his 8 years at the University of Berlin (where he obtained his doctorate and became a lawyer), Weber was financially dependent on his father, a circumstance he progressively grew to dislike. At the same time, he moved closer to his mother's values, and his antipathy toward his father increased. He adopted an ascetic way of life and plunged deeply into his work. During one semester as a student, his work habits were described as follows: "He continues the rigid work discipline, regulates his life by the clock, divides the daily routine into exact sections for the various subjects, saves in his way, by feeding himself evenings in his room with a pound of raw chopped beef and four fried eggs." Weber, emulating his mother, had become ascetic and diligent, a compulsive worker—in contemporary terms, a *workaholic*.

This compulsion for work led him in 1896 to a position as professor of economics at Heidelberg University. But in 1897, when Weber's academic career was blossoming, his father died following a violent argument between them. Soon after, Weber began to manifest symptoms that culminated in a nervous breakdown. Often unable to sleep or to work, Weber spent the next 6 or 7 years in near total collapse. After a long hiatus, some of his faculties began to return in 1903, but it was not until 1904, when he delivered (in the United States) his first lecture in 6.5 years, that Weber was able to begin to return to active academic life. In 1904 and 1905, he published one of his best-known works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this work, Weber announced the ascendance, on an academic level, of his mother's religiosity. Weber devoted much of his time to the study of religion, although he was not personally religious.

Types of Action

Weber offered a now-famous delineation of four types of action. **Affectual action** (which was of little concern to Weber) is action that is the result of emotion; it is nonrational. Thus, slapping your child (or an aged parent) in a blind rage is an example of affectual action. Also nonrational is **traditional action**, in which what is done is based on the way things have been done habitually or customarily. Crossing oneself in church is an example of traditional action. Although traditional action was of some interest to Weber (especially given its relationship to traditional authority, discussed later in this chapter), he was far more interested,

affectual action–Nonrational action that is the result of emotion (Weber).

traditional action–Action taken on the basis of the way things have been done habitually or customarily (Weber).

because of his overriding concern with rationalization, in the other two types of action, both of which are rational.

Value-rational action occurs when an actor's choice of the means to an end is based on the actor's belief in some larger set of values. The action chosen may not be optimal, but it is rational from the point of view of the value system in which the actor finds herself. So, if you belong to a cult that believes in a ritual purging of one's previous meal before the next meal is eaten, that is what you do, even though purging may be quite uncomfortable and will delay, if not ruin, your next meal. Such action would be rational from the point of view of the value system of the cult.

Means-ends rational action involves the pursuit of ends that actors have chosen for themselves; thus, their action is not guided by some larger value system. It is, however, affected by the actors' view of the environment in which they finds themselves, including the behavior of people and objects in it. This means that the actor must take into account the nature of the situation when choosing the best means to an end. Thus, when you are at a party and spot someone you want to dance with, you must decide on the best way to meet that person, given the nature of the situation (it may be an all-couples party) and the objects (there may be a table in your path) and other people (one of whom may already be dancing with that person) present. Taking those things into consideration, you choose the best means of achieving your end of getting that dance.

These four types of actions are ideal types (see the discussion of the ideal type that follows). The fact is that one rarely if ever finds actions that can be categorized solely within one of these four types. Rather, any given action is likely to be some combination of two or more of these ideal-typical actions.

Weber offers an approach to studying social action and the theoretical tools to examine such action. Many sociologists have found this work useful.

Types of Rationality

Although Weber's theory of action relies on the typology outlined previously, his larger theory of rationalization rests on the typology of rationality outlined as follows. (As you will see, the two typologies overlap to some degree.)

Practical rationality is the type that we all practice on a daily basis in getting from one point to another. Given the realities of the circumstances we face, we try

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value-rational action–Action that occurs when an actor's choice of the means to an end is based on the actor's belief in some larger set of values. The action chosen may not be optimal, but it is rational from the point of view of the value system in which actors find themselves (Weber).

means-ends rational action–Action that involves the pursuit of ends that actors have chosen for themselves; that choice is affected by the actors' view of the environment in which they find themselves, including the behavior of people and objects in it (Weber).

practical rationality–The type of rationality people use on a day-to-day basis in dealing with whatever difficulties exist and finding the most expedient way of attaining the goal of getting from one point to another (Weber).