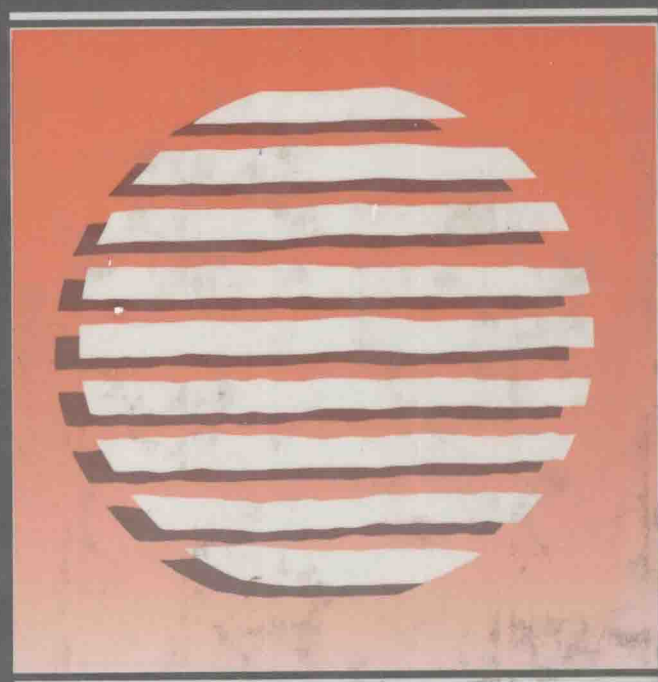


Societal Dynamics

Exploring
Macrosociology



Marvin E. Olsen

SOCIETAL DYNAMICS

Exploring Macrosociology

MARVIN E. OLSEN

Michigan State University



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PREFACE TO INSTRUCTORS

This introductory sociology textbook is designed for instructors who want to teach an intellectually challenging and stimulating course. My experience in teaching this course over the past 25 years has convinced me that most students can handle a much more intellectually demanding course than is commonly taught. Moreover, better students are frequently disappointed and disillusioned with the introductory course as it is frequently taught, and they consequently lose interest in taking additional sociology courses. I hope that this text will attract students to sociology rather than repel them—as the introductory course almost did to me many years ago.

To meet that challenge, the book contains more material than most other introductory texts. In writing the book, I have followed the strategy of including as many ideas and topics as might be appropriate for a variety of introductory courses, since material that one instructor feels is unnecessary may be crucial for another instructor. When preparing reading assignments for students, I have always found it much easier to tell them to skip certain topics or pages rather than having to locate and assign supplementary readings to cover material I thought was crucial but was omitted from the basic textbook. Quite likely, therefore, you may decide not to deal with all of the concepts and topics presented here on the grounds that some of the material is not necessary for beginning students. In my own teaching, I often omit some of the material contained in whatever text I am using, and I strongly encourage you to use this book in whatever selective manner best suits your particular course.

This text is written from a particular perspective and makes no attempt to be totally eclectic—which I believe makes introductory textbooks either bland or confusing for students. If you are familiar with the “Michigan perspective” in introductory texts—as expressed in *Principles of Sociology* by Ronald Freedman, Amos Hawley, Werner Landecker, Gerhard Lenski, and Horace Miner; *The Organization of Society* by Paul Mott; and *Human Societies* by Gerhard Lenski and Jean Lenski—you will quickly identify this book as following in that tradition. Three principal features characterize this perspective: (1) A primary focus on macrosociology, or social organization, rather than on microsociology, or social psychology; (2) A pervasive concern with societal evolution and the way in which the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy affects virtually all aspects of societies; and (3) The use of a social ecology framework to explain the evolution of social organization.

To that “Michigan perspective” I have added three additional themes: (4) The fundamental importance of the economy as the institutional realm through which ecological forces affect human societies, as well as the social

inequalities that commonly result from the functioning of the ecological and economic systems; (5) The central role of social power throughout all social organization, and particularly its concentration and use by the state; and (6) The pervasive nature and effects of belief systems and values in shaping and perpetuating human social life. In short, the dominant themes in this book are *social organization*, *political economy*, and *ecological evolution*.

The first two “Michigan texts” are no longer in print, but the Lenski’s *Human Societies* is. This book differs from theirs in four main ways: (1) My treatment of basic sociological concepts, perspectives, and theories is much more extensive than theirs, comprising six rather than just two chapters. (2) I give somewhat less detailed attention to preindustrial societies than do the Lenskis, and I focus on developmental trends running throughout all preindustrial societies. (3) My treatment of industrial societies is considerably more extensive than theirs, with much more attention to the political economy of modern states and a more critical stance toward socioeconomic inequality. (4) I include two chapters dealing with postindustrial societies, compared to the one brief chapter on this topic in the Lenski’s book.

If you are familiar with either the first or second edition of my book, *The Process of Social Organization*, you will recognize many ideas from it in this text, especially in Part I, but they have been considerably reworked to be appropriate to an introductory course.

The book is divided into four major parts. Part I, Conceptual Tools, presents the basic concepts, theoretical perspectives, and social processes used throughout the book. Part II, Preindustrial Societies, discusses those societies from both ecological/economic and social organizational perspectives, as well as the transition from agriculture to industrialism in the past and present. Part III, Industrial Societies, begins with the ecological base of industrialized societies and then covers all of the major facets and dimensions of modern societies. Part IV, Postindustrial Societies, sketches a number of emerging crises in contemporary societies and the current process of societal transformation into a postindustrial society. For consistency, each chapter is divided into five major sections, plus a comprehensive summary.

I want to thank sincerely all of my intellectual mentors—including Ed Swanson, Gerry Lenski, Al Reiss, Bill Gamson, Amos Hawley, Morris Janowitz, Ted Newcomb, Tom Lasswell, and John Burma—for initiating the process of intellectual exploration that has resulted in this book. They are obviously not responsible for anything in it, but I hope they will recognize some of their thinking in these pages. In particular, I am deeply indebted to Gerry Lenski for many of the ideas concerning ecological evolution and patterns of stratification that are central to this book. I also want to thank Michael Micklin for all his assistance in planning and editing this book, as well as his substantive contributions to Chapter 11. And I deeply appreciate the countless hours that Tammy Dennany spent typing this lengthy manuscript.

Marvin E. Olsen

PREFACE TO STUDENTS

Welcome to the world of sociology! The purpose of studying sociology is to increase our understanding of the nature and dynamics of organized social life, beyond the common sense we all acquire as members of our society. I hope that this text will expand your vision of society in two crucial ways: (1) offering a new perspective on the social world in which you live, which is sometimes called a “sociological perspective,” and which may be quite different from the way in which you presently view social life; and (2) providing a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the processes and forces that have created the kind of industrialized-urbanized society in which we live today, and that are presently transforming our society in fundamental ways that we are now only beginning to discern.

This text is intended to be intellectually challenging and demanding, but if you are serious about exploring the world of sociology, you can master it. By the time you finish this course, I trust that you will have learned a great deal, that you will have gained a sociological perspective on the world, and that you will have a better understanding of contemporary societies in the process of ecological evolution.

The book is divided into four major parts. Part I, *Conceptual Tools*, presents the basic concepts, theoretical perspectives, and social processes used throughout the book. Part II, *Preindustrial Societies*, discusses those earlier forms of societies as well as the transition from agriculture to industrialism in the past and present. Part III, *Industrial Societies*, includes chapters on all of the major aspects of modern societies, which are the central concerns of sociology. Part IV, *Postindustrial Societies*, sketches a number of emerging crises in contemporary societies and the process of societal transformation that is moving us into a postindustrial society. For consistency, each chapter is divided into five major sections, plus a comprehensive summary.

The study of sociology can be fascinating and deeply satisfying, both as an intellectual challenge and as a means of understanding the social world in which we live. I have always been thrilled with sociology, and I sincerely hope you will be also.

Marvin E. Olsen

To understand the social structure we must therefore view it in the historical process, seeking continuity, relating time-differences to time-likeness. We must, in other words, discover the direction of change, or all is meaningless. That is why the principle of evolution becomes of supreme significance. . . .

Moreover, social phenomena are historical phenomena in a profounder sense than any other. . . . Society exists only as a time-sequence. It is a becoming, not a being; a process, not a product.

Robert M. MacIver, *Society: A Textbook of Sociology*, 1937, pp. 391, 394.

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CHAPTER

1

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

What does sociology deal with, and how is it different from psychology?
What do we mean by “social organization,” and why is it called a process?
What concerns did Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim share?
How do sociologists go about studying social life in a scientific manner?
Is it possible for sociologists to be both objective and value-involved?

HUMAN EXISTENCE

Human beings are always and inexorably social creatures. We must interact with one another if we are to survive as individuals or as a species. And through that interaction we create social organization. Thus human survival is a collective or organizational process (Hawley, 1986). There are no records of even the most primitive people ever living without some kind of social organization, and contemporary social life is very complexly organized.

People must create social organization if they are to attain the goals they seek. Regardless of whether we desire material comfort, personal growth, a happy marriage, community improvement, reduction of socioeconomic inequality, national prosperity, or international peace, we cannot realize these goals without participating in various forms of social organization. Throughout our lives we take part in many different kinds of organizations, ranging in size from our family

and friendship groups to our society and the entire world system.

Another fundamental feature of human life is that we all seek meaning or purpose in our existence and activities. As self-conscious thinking beings we constantly search for knowledge, beliefs, and values that give meaning to life. That search necessitates our communicating with others and sharing common cultural ideas with them.

The Quest

Although most of humanity throughout history has struggled to cope with the practical demands of surviving, achieving goals, and finding meaning in life, in all eras some people have undertaken the demanding quest of understanding the nature and dynamics of organized human life. In the past, these inquirers were often called social philosophers, while today they are likely to be social scientists. Their methods of inquiry have changed through time, but the quest

remains the same: to understand the process and forms of human social organization.

This book introduces you to that intellectual quest by presenting a set of concepts and theoretical ideas for understanding social organization, sketching the course of socio-cultural evolution, exploring ways in which the transition from agricultural to industrial societies has altered virtually every aspect of human social life, and raising some questions about the directions of possible future trends in human societies.

Before we embark on that quest, however, we must be clear about one fundamental feature of existence as we know it. *All reality is process, and process is reality.*

The universe is continually expanding; stars go through a cycle from birth to death; subatomic particles are forever in motion; life is relentlessly evolving from simple to complex forms; the human mind continues to learn and develop throughout life; and societies are never the same from one generation to the next. As expressed by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1928:317), "The flux of things is one ultimate generalization around which we must weave our philosophical system." Consequently, the many varieties of social organization that people create to ensure survival, attain goals, and give meaning to life are all dynamic processes. *Human social organization is always an ongoing process, never a static condition.*

Levels of Ordering

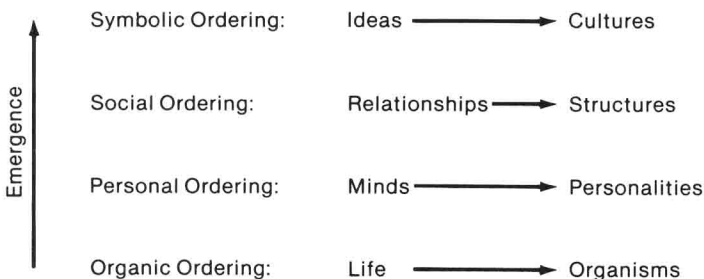
The components of human life ultimately form a unified whole, since all aspects of the ongoing process of reality are interrelated.

Within this totality of human life, however, we can identify four relatively distinct levels of ordering, or sets of dynamic processes: organic, personal, social, and symbolic. Each successively higher level of ordering is based on all lower levels, but also displays characteristics that do not occur at lower levels and which give it a reality of its own. These levels of ordering are shown in Figure 1-1 and described as follows.

Organic ordering is distinguished from all levels of physical existence by the presence of life. The principal type of organic system is the organism, either plant or animal; but parts of organisms (such as organs) are also ordered, as are relationships among organisms (such as food chains). Human beings are first of all biological organisms that must continually satisfy basic needs for oxygen, water, food, warmth, reproduction, and other necessities of biological life.

Personal ordering is distinguished from the organic level by the presence of a mind that is capable of intellectual, emotional, and evaluative activities. The principal type of personal system is the personality. All mammals appear to have at least rudimentary personalities, but the capabilities of the human mind are so much more extensive and complex than in most other mammals that we usually think of this level of ordering as applying only to people. Each individual possesses a distinct personality with drives for security, affection, acceptance, recognition, personal growth, and other psychological requirements.

Social ordering is distinguished from the personal level by the existence of relationships among minds or personalities. Al-



Interpenetration ↓

FIGURE 1-1
Levels of ordering
in human life

though individuals create social ordering through their interaction, it consists of stable patterns of social structure. There are many different types of social ordering, or collectivities, but the most basic is the family and the most encompassing is the society. From the moment of birth we all live as members of many collectivities, and we could not exist without them.

Symbolic ordering is distinguished from the social level by the existence of ideas that are encoded into abstract symbols. There are many types of symbolic systems, or cultures, throughout the world that are associated with societies and other collectivities but are not identical to them. Throughout our lives we are constantly seeking to expand and enrich our symbolic systems as we communicate with others about our experiences, feelings, expectations, values, and beliefs.

To the extent that these levels of ordering are identifiable in human life, each is characterized by the three qualities of *emergence*, *independence*, and *interpenetration*. A level of ordering emerges from, or develops out of, the levels below it and is always dependent on them for its existence.

Personalities develop in conjunction with organic bodies and do not survive when the organism dies; a group is created only when two or more personalities interact and ceases to exist when all of its members withdraw; and cultures grow out of shared social experiences and become museum relics when their societies disappear. At the same time, each level of ordering possesses some independence, or autonomy, from lower levels by virtue of its distinctive characteristics. Consequently, no level is fully determined by lower levels. A personality is more than just an animated body; a group is more than just a collection of individuals; and a belief system is more than just a literal description of social life. Finally, each level of ordering interpenetrates all lower levels in the sense that it frequently influences them as well as being influenced by them. Personality tensions can result in stomach ulcers, while poor nutrition can cause emotional problems. One's work group can influence one's self-

image, while a neurotic supervisor can limit the productivity of the entire group. Religious convictions can lead to collective warfare or individual martyrdom, while the complexity of a society's social structure can affect the kind of deity in which its people believe.

Perspectives and Disciplines

Although human existence incorporates all four levels of ordering, when we attempt to describe or explain human activities we often do so from the perspective of a single level (either entirely or predominantly). Associated with each of these perspectives are a number of scientific and applied disciplines. With a biological perspective, we focus on the organic features of human life, as practiced in biology, physiology, and medicine. With a psychological perspective, we focus on the mental or personality characteristics of human life, as practiced in psychology, psychiatry, and education. With a sociological perspective, we focus on the social or collective aspects of human life, as practiced in sociology, economics, political science, anthropology, social work, and public administration. With a cultural perspective, we focus on sets of symbolic ideas or meanings in human life, as practiced in philosophy, literature, linguistics, law, and religion.

Most disciplines are not very tightly contained within a single perspective, however, and tend to incorporate other perspectives to some extent. Thus psychology takes account of physiological and social influences on the personality, and sociology examines the ways in which personality characteristics and cultural values shape social life. There are also many interdisciplinary fields that bridge adjacent perspectives, such as physiological psychology, social psychology, the sociology of law, and the sociology of religion. The linkages between levels of ordering and disciplines of study make clear, however, that all of the social sciences share a common analytical perspective. They all focus primarily on patterns of relationships among people, although they commonly emphasize