

# Society and the Official World:

*A Reintroduction to Sociology*



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# **Society and the Official World:**

## **A Reintroduction to Sociology**

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A Reintroduction to Sociology

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## Preface

One of my most vivid memories of college is that of sitting in my first sociology class and listening to a young professor talk about my home county. The War on Poverty was in full swing at the time, and the plight of Appalachian people was a popular topic. As luck would have it, on this particular day the teacher had decided to profile the county in which I had grown up. What I remember most from that class is not the income figures he put on the board (among the lowest in the nation) or the housing value statistics or any of the other official characteristics of the county. Instead, I remember the unreal feeling, the complete disorientation that I felt when the young professor began to describe what it must be like to live in such a depressed place. The picture he painted of the horrors of living there were vivid and probably had an impact on those not familiar with the county. For me, they were simply confusing. I did not recognize the place he was talking about, even though I had lived there nearly all my life. The people he described were mine, but what he said about them, based on his statistical extrapolation, was completely wrong. I did not protest. After all, he was a learned professor, and I was only a student. So, like everyone else, I memorized what he said and gave it back to him on the examination, but I also began to think, and have continued to think over the years, about a discipline that creates an image of the world that is totally different from how it is seen by those who live in it.

Another memory of sociology classes is my "each semester sinking feeling." This usually occurred early in the semester when the teacher was covering the requirements for the course. He or she would tell us that we were to write a paper or research report on something that we found interesting. My immediate response to such statements was a physical feeling of emptiness, of a sinking in the pit of my stomach, of a sense of impending doom. People and society were fascinating to me, and I was very interested in them. But, for some reason, these interesting topics never seemed to get into sociology class. They were nowhere to be found in the Tables of Contents of our texts, either. You could ask the teacher for help in selecting a topic related to something you were interested in, but by the time the teacher was through with it, any interesting aspect of the topic had been sucked out of it. Thus, paper writing became a dreaded chore of trying to please the teacher instead of an opportunity to discover something about the world in which we live.

This book is written in response to those early memories of sociology classes. It is written so that students will not have to sit in the back of the room, listen to the professor talk about the world, and wonder where that place is that is being discussed. It is written for students who find people and Society fascinating, and who would love to study them, but who are unable to find anything to excite them—or even anything about people or Society—in the usual sociology texts. The differences between this text and those often found in an introductory sociology class can be easily seen with a short perusal of the Contents of this book and a quick reading of the book's Introduction.

In short, what I have done in this book is to correct the myth developed in introductory sociology texts that equates official reality with social life. My concern is with describing what we do and the arrangements that we make in Society, not with advocating what is legal/illegal or what we “ought/ought not” do. Students have found this approach exciting. It allows them to deal honestly with a Society that they know instead of having to restrict their comments to those that are acceptable to an official, legal structure to which their class content is normally limited.

This book has been developed over a number of years as I have tried to find some way to have a conversation with students about Society. Its development would never have reached the present stage, however, if those initial drafts had not been received enthusiastically by students. Their reactions have provided the motivation to continue writing, changing the book yearly based on student input and on the growth in my own ideas. Although my name is on the cover, this work is a product of the classroom and the people in it. Because of the manner in which it was developed, this book will be useful both to the student and to the teacher.

I owe thanks to Dick Futrell, Eastern Kentucky University, and Rich Voorhes, Inver Hills Community College, for their extensive comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. For her editorial work, I want to thank Beckie Mullin Denton. My appreciation goes to Larry Reynolds, professor of sociology at Central Michigan University and editor of *General Hall*, for making this book possible.

## INTRODUCTION

If you enjoy making your teachers uncomfortable and you want an easy way to do so, pick a headline story from the newspaper or a feature on the evening news telecast and ask them to explain how it directly affects you. On second thought, it is probably safer for your grade if you avoid your teachers' wrath and their looks of disbelief at your incredible ignorance by simply asking yourself how the major news items of the day are directly important in your life. After thinking about it, you will probably find that they are of no consequence even though they are spoken of with gravity and even though your eighth grade civics teacher drummed into your head that you should be concerned with them. Should you think (or should a teacher lamely try to explain) that these events may be significant someday or that they may be important in ways too complicated for you to understand, discard these thoughts. They are conjectures that, if you spend time worrying about them, will take your mind away from what is really of concern to you and those around you. For what is actually important to you is not what is in the news or the items to which your teachers tell you to pay attention. Instead, it is questions such as what your spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend is doing right now, how you will get dollars for the weekend, how you will get a decent grade in this class, whether you should make up with your sister with whom you have been feuding, how you are going to make a living after you finish school, whether your parents are going to be fighting when you go home this weekend, how you can get over the cold you have, or whether you will need an abortion since you're three weeks late in starting your period. You are constantly being told that certain events are important and that you should pay attention to them, but you know at a "gut" level that they are of no concern to you. This distinction between what you are being told and what you know is the starting point for this introduction.

The world in which we live can be divided into the Official World and Society. I explain these terms in detail later. For now, suffice it to say that the Official World is the world that you have been told is important and that you have been learning about almost exclusively in your school career. It is the world of headlines and network news. It is the world described by the President, members of Congress, corporation executives, church pastors, university presidents, and military commanders. It is the world you read about in a traditional sociology text. It is a world of roles and role players;



of large, formal organizations such as corporations, government, denominations, churches, and hospitals; and of oddities such as divisions of labor, social classes, and systems.

Society, in contrast, is a world of human beings. It is a world made up of friends, enemies, relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances. It is people we bump into at a local bar, sit next to at church, buy from at a yard sale, and work with on the job. Society is a world filled with people and the arrangements that we make with one another. It is a world of interwoven relationships, networks, groups, households, and communities. It is the world that is important to you.

In the years since World War II, traditional sociology has been increasingly restricted to a study of the Official World.<sup>1</sup> Instead of studying education and trying to find out how and from whom we learn (i.e., Society), sociologists study schools and schooling (i.e., Official World). Instead of trying to find out what to do in case of illness and what resources are used to treat illness (Society), sociologists study hospitals, physicians, and the pharmaceutical industry (Official World). Instead of studying what we worship and why (Society), sociologists study churches, denominations, and clerical roles (Official World). Instead of looking at how we make a living and how we are living (Society), sociologists study work organizations, employment/unemployment, and income classes (Official World). Instead of studying how and on what bases we influence one another (Society), sociologists study governments and public organizations (Official World). By ignoring Society while arguing that it is actually studying it, traditional sociology has created a body of data that tells us very little about what is important to human beings. In doing so, the field has misled (or bored to death) several generations of students, has lost any respect we might have regarding its ability to help us understand social activity, has served as a tool to justify the Official World's attempts to repress Society, and, perhaps most seriously, has ignored until nearly extinct basic concepts that can be used to understand Society.<sup>2</sup>

Now that I have created the impression that the Official World is not important to us, I must back up and state that, actually, it is. But, this is not a contradiction. The Official World is significant, but it is not the entire world in which we live, as it has been portrayed by traditional sociology. Its importance is limited. The Official World is part of the environment in which we make the arrangements necessary to meet our needs. As such, it serves as both a constraint on and a resource for Society. The Official World is much like a building. It restrains you in that, within it, you find your movements limited. You would have difficulty, for example, in walking through the wall instead of through the door. If you became sufficiently upset by this, you might decide to cut a new door. Or, if you were especially restricted, you might destroy the entire building and put up one that is less constrain-

ing. The odds are, though, that such an alteration of the building would take too much time and be too disruptive to you and what is really important to you. Thus, you either put up with the restraints, working around them as best you can, or, perhaps, you find another building in which to work.

Like the building, the Official World restrains us and the arrangements we can make. Unlike the building, which is inanimate, the Official World is constantly changing in ways that increase the constraints on Society. One of the major processes that we continually face is an ongoing attempt by the Official World to make Society part of that world. On an individual level, one way in which we may face this is as a gradual erosion of freedom as more and more of our time has to be spent in the Official World. On a societal level, one way in which this attempt is seen is as a constant pressure to make our relationships and arrangements look like and be accountable to some Official World organization or agency. This process is discussed in detail in Part II. For the present, let's just say that there is an ongoing attempt in the Official World to subsume/consume Society by constructing new restraints (rules) and the enforcement procedures for them and by selecting cultural elements that support these rules.

Traditional sociology has helped in this ongoing attempt by the Official World to increase its control over Society by taking a very pessimistic view of humans and their ability to make lives and arrangements outside the Official World. From traditional sociology's perspective, we do not have a life outside the Official World. We are considered to be players of roles (fillers of positions), with the roles found only in the Official World. The individual is defined as nothing more than the sum of the roles that he or she plays. On occasion, it is admitted that certain individuals act as humans rather than perfect role players and do take actions outside Official World standards of acceptability. These instances, which are considered relatively rare, are usually given the negative label of deviance and are considered "problems" to be solved (i.e., the actions are to be brought back under Official World control). Thus, from the point of view of traditional sociology, no activity other than deviant or exceptional activity occurs outside the Official World; the Official World is "all there is"; and Society is simply a synonym for the Official World. Promoting these ideas has helped create the image that there is no alternative to the existing Official World and that human beings are powerless outside this world.

The idea that Society does not exist outside the Official World ignores the creative potential we all have and the ingenuity we exhibit in making arrangements. It is an idea that is directly contradicted by our experiences. The world in which we live is very different from the Official World and the "helpless" role players found there. In Society, the Official World is more than a constraint. It is also a resource to be used in the meeting of needs, the satisfying of desires, and the supporting of relationships, networks, groups,

households, and communities. Just as the building described above restrains you somewhat, it is also a place to get out of the rain and keep warm; a place, perhaps, to meet away from prying eyes; a place to use the restroom or borrow the phone; a place to write on walls or loaf; a place to hide or to store goods; a place that can be put to any number of creative uses. We are constantly attempting to meet our needs, satisfy our desires, and act in terms of the people with whom we have ties. In doing this, we use whatever resources are available to us. The Official World is one of many such resources.

In the preceding pages, I have mentioned the three major topics to be discussed in depth in this book. In part I, I define the basic concepts to be used in describing and understanding Society, and I compare them with several major concepts now used in traditional sociology. This is a continuation of the above discussion, and it further illustrates the distinction between the Official World and Society. In part II, I examine the ongoing process by which the Official World attempts to control Society. In part III, I explore a variety of ways in which humans construct Society and use the Official World as a resource for meeting needs and satisfying desires.

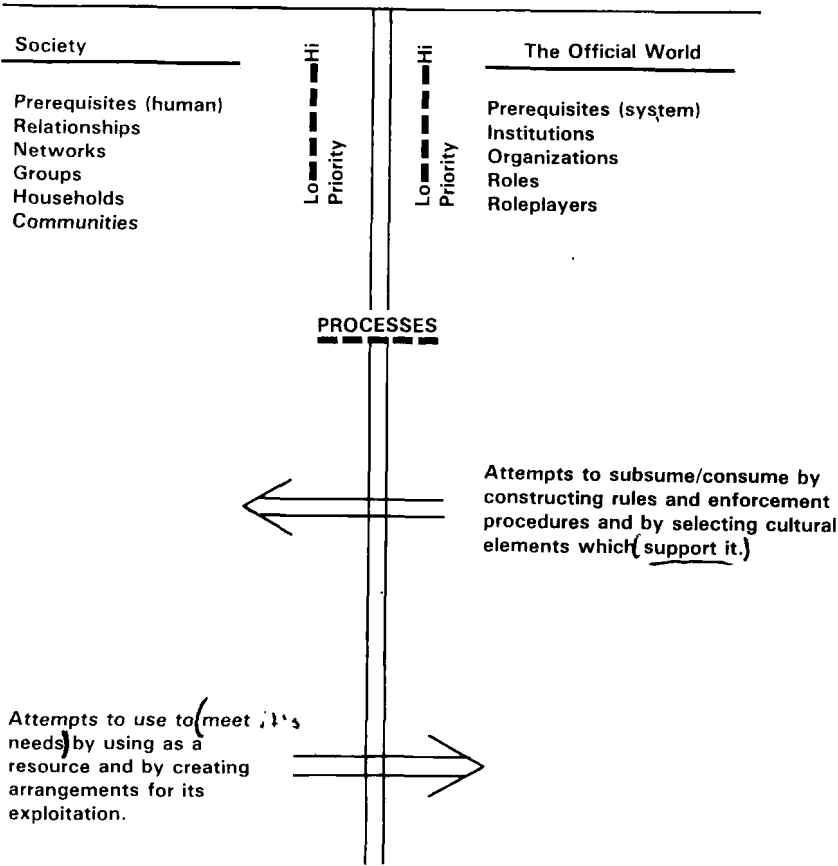
## **Part I**

### **Society and the Official World: Defining Concepts**

Our purpose in this part is to define the concepts that will help us describe and understand the world in which we live. Since the emphasis so far in your school career has probably been on the Official World, I begin with the concepts least familiar to you — those for describing and understanding Society. After discussing Society, I examine several concepts used in describing the Official World.

Figure 1 illustrates the concepts discussed in this book. I am delving into a subject that may be strange to you and am making statements that may contradict your traditional sociology text. Thus a certain amount of confusion (consternation?) is to be expected. In order to clarify the discussion, you may want to refer back occasionally to the figure as the next two chapters define the concepts listed under Society and under the Official World.

**Figure 1**  
**The World in Which We Live**



## Chapter 1 Society

To illustrate to a class that we live in a world that we tend not to see, I go into the classroom and ask the students what they do when they get sick. Almost without exception, the immediate response is that they “go to a doctor.” This statement is an Official World reply that has been programmed into them (and you). It states that whenever we get sick, we deal with the illness by entering an official organization such as a hospital or a physician’s office. The major problem with this response is that it is not correct. But when I jokingly call the people in the class liars and order them to quit fooling around and tell me what they do when they get sick, at first they are at a loss for words. Even though they live the answer every day, they do not see it. Very gradually, they begin to say such things as, “Well, I call my mother and ask her what to do.” “I just cut classes and go to bed to see if I can sleep it off.” “I ask a friend of mine who is a nurse what to do.” “I drink a ‘hot toddy’ or two, and that makes me feel better.” “Well, you see, I have this book that I keep which gives remedies for everything, and I use it.” “I ask a herbalist at the health food store what to do.” “I watch cartoons; they make me feel better.” And the answers, once they start, go on and on.

From the point of view of the Official World, these actions are deviant and a minority of those taken. Thus they have been depreciated until either we do not think about them or, if thought about, we hide them because of embarrassment or shame that comes from their use. Actually, such actions (or Society) are the vast majority, and it is the entrance into hospitals or physicians’ offices that is relatively rare or deviant (see the discussion of self-treatment in Chapter 3).

The point that we live in a world we tend not to see can also be made by looking at clothing. Occasionally, without any prior explanation, I ask members of a class where they get their clothes. The immediate response, after a few looks around to see if I am crazy because any fool knows where we get clothes, is that “we buy them at the store.” Again, I dispute their answer, and I begin to ask them about specific items of clothing that they are wearing. Gradually, it begins to come out that “Well, I got this as a present for my birthday.” “I bought these at a yard sale.” “I took this blouse out of my sister’s closet without her knowing about it.” “My girlfriend gave me this sweater.” “I have an aunt who makes clothes for all her nephews and nieces.” “My roommate threw away this sweatshirt, and I got it.” “This

coat was a hand-me-down from a brother.” “I borrowed this and didn’t return it.” Often, faces turn red with embarrassment when it comes out that an article of clothing came from a yard sale, a used-clothing store, or was handmade. To the present, these means of getting clothing have been defined as deviant. By the time the exercise is over, members of the class realize that they may actually be in the majority. Those who go directly into the Official World and buy may be the deviants.<sup>1</sup>

### **An Illustration**

My asking about what we do when we are sick or about where we get our clothes is a way to make a point about the scope of our activities outside the Official World. The problem, however, is that if we stay focused on specific, individual problems, we miss the essence of Society. Society is a set of relationships, networks, groups, households, and communities that constantly tie us together and in which we live our lives. From this morass of ties that we have with others, we can, when necessary, call on some for the meeting of needs (e.g., health care and clothing). The following short description illustrates Society.

You are sitting in the campus grill with the early morning crew that hangs around there. This morning it is you, Carey, Rick, and Megan. Carey has just come in with an examination from Dr. Oxwald’s last-semester class. Three of the four of you are taking the same course this semester, and are busy grabbing pages from the exam and looking at them. Grunts and groans, moans of pain, sounds of exasperation escape as you see questions from material which you have never seen or cannot remember. After a few minutes of this common agony, Megan wonders out loud if Oxwald is really going to stick to the syllabus and require them to have the entire book read before the exam. You had him for a course last semester in which he began feeling sorry for the students and eventually cut back significantly on the reading requirements. So you tell everyone that if they treat Oxwald right, he might change the requirements from those stated in the syllabus.

As you finish, George, a regular member of the morning group, slides into a seat. He looks tired because he has just come from his job as a night clerk at a local motel. For a few minutes, he dominates the conversation as he cusses his job and how it is wearing him down. Then, after a few minutes to cool off, he notes that in spite of the lousy pay, the fringe benefits on his job are good. He can get enough sleep on the job to continue to function the next day. And as an added bonus, last night, one of the machines had started giving out candy without having any money put in it. He had eaten free, and he starts handing out candy bars to everyone. As he is finishing up his tale about the candy machine, he looks around the table and asks if anyone

can help him move from one apartment to another the coming Saturday. Rick, who had helped with George's last move, says he can't help this time because his dad's truck isn't running right and he can't use it the way it is.

George asks Rick if it is the same old truck they used the year before and that even then had a leak in the radiator. When Rick said it is and that the radiator has not been replaced, it is only leaking worse and is causing the engine to miss from getting wet, George says that he will fix it for him in exchange for its use. He will do it, that is, if he can find a used radiator to fit the truck. He asks if any of them know where he can get a cheap radiator. You tell him that you don't know, but that a friend of yours might. You give him the friend's phone number, and Rick and George work out the arrangements for getting the truck from Rick's dad.

While this is going on, Megan asks Carey if she isn't supposed to be in a class right now. Carey says that she is but that she has given up on the class and doesn't go anymore. She says that she did all right in the course until her mom got sick and she had to go home for a few days to help out there. After that, she never caught up again.

Megan wants to know if Carey has dropped the class. Carey says no, that it is crazy to because it costs money to do so and nothing is gained by it. Besides, dropping the class would put her below the credit hours for a full-time student and threaten her student loan. She says that she will have to take the class over anyway, since it is required for her major, and that only the last grade will count on her records. Thus it is a waste of money and time standing in line for her to drop the course.

Eventually, the conversation turns back to the exam from Dr. Oxwald. George, who is also taking the class, wants to know if anybody has studied for the test. He was going to, he says, but an uncle of his was adding a room to his house while laid off from his job. George had gone home on the weekend to help him work on the house.

Megan says that she also has not studied for the exam. She says that she was going to, but that she had had to go home for a dentist appointment. Her father, who owns a small business in her home town, had unexpectedly worked out a deal with a local dentist to trade some item from his store for some major dental work that Megan needed. She had had to go home and get the work started. Now, she said, her head hurt so badly that she did not want to study anyway.

Immediately on hearing that she felt bad, the others around the table began to ply her with questions about what she had done for herself. Had she taken anything? What did she intend to do? When Rick asked if she had been to the infirmary, this met with a big laugh from all of them. No one went to the infirmary if they could get help anywhere else.

After asking questions for a few minutes about what she had done, her friends began to make statements about what she ought to do to feel better.



Much advice was given about actions, favorite substances to take, and people to see in order to feel better.

Megan said that she probably wouldn't do anything because she thought her problem was only a leftover from the dental work. But if it did get worse, she would have her roommate give her some medicine that she could get from the doctor's office where she worked part-time. Megan did say that what would make her feel better would be if Rick would do her term paper for her on his word processor. Rick said that she had to be kidding, that he was too busy as it was. After a few minutes of haggling, however, he agreed to type her paper for her that night if she would come over to his place and bring along some beer.

No short description, such as the one above, can capture the complexity of Society. But, as with any conversation among friends, it can illustrate the point that our contacts with the Official World are tangential. The Official World is mentioned several times by members of the group. For instance, the Official World is the grill, though its intended use was as an eating, not a meeting, place. The syllabus is part of the Official World, as is the pay scale George is receiving. The requirement that classes be attended is part of the Official World, as are the procedures for dropping a course. The infirmary is a part of the Official World, as is the requirement for a paper in Megan's class.

The beer may be part of the Official World, assuming it is made in an official organization and purchased through official retail channels. If the beer is homemade, stolen, borrowed, received as a gift, bought from a bootlegger, or purchased by a minor, it has become part of Society. Similarly, if dental services come from an Official World dentist and are purchased in Official World fashion, then they are part of that world. If the services are provided as an unofficial transaction—as in the above example—or given away, then they are no longer part of the Official World. The professor, as a role player and enforcer of Official World rules, is part of that world. But as soon as he or she begins “to relax,” begins to “feel sorry” or otherwise to have human emotions, then he or she becomes part of Society.

Thus the Official World constantly pops up in conversation, but it is not the total world. You will note that most of what is discussed in the group is oriented to the individuals' needs and to their relationships, networks, groups, households, and communities. The meeting of their needs comes from the relationships they have.

In the example above, I used a group of college students to illustrate that most of our social activity is only loosely connected to the Official World. If someone should think that what college students do is atypical, I could have made the same point by eavesdropping on corporate executives at a country club, welfare recipients in a poor neighborhood, workers in a break room at a business, or your family at the dinner table.