JOHN
WALTON

SOCIOLOGY AND CRITICAL INQUIRY

THE WORK, TRADITION, AND PURPOSE

SECOND EDITION

Sociology and Critical Inquiry

The Work, Tradition, and Purpose

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Sociology and Critical Inquiry

The Work, Tradition, and Purpose

ADVISING EDITOR IN SOCIOLOGY

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Prologue

In the pages that follow, I attempt something unusual by way of an introduction to sociology. I try to present the method and a strong dose of the substance of modern sociology in a manner that is both accessible to the general reader and faithful to the discipline. I want to portray the best work of professional sociologists and carry it forward to matters of public concern, rather than tone it down for indifferent consumption. That is possible, I believe, for two reasons.

First, sociology is a lively subject that engages people of diverse occupations and avocations. It enjoys the distinction among academic disciplines of addressing matters that involve a broad public similarly devoted to understanding pieces of the social order. Sociologists and journalists conduct surveys or opinion polls trying to fathom public moods. Sociologists and lawyers study the development and application of laws. There is a sociology of medicine, welfare, occupations, art, and many more. Sociologists theorize about the roots of social order and conflict, as do others who reflect on, say, the causes of crime or family dissolution. Indeed, many sociological explanations bear a close resemblance to lay theories and vice versa. Many of sociology's central problems coincide with important dilemmas of public policy and social ethics.

Second, sociology is intrinsically lively. Its investigative methods have the intrigue of detective stories. Its results turn up bracing refutations of common sense. Its diagnoses have been incorporated into public policies on social welfare and reform. We all experience society and share in the perplexities of how to explain it. We can see our collective selves in social research about the changing structure of social classes, jobs, leisure, or cities and suburbs.

This book is written for people who are curious about explanations for social phenomena. I address students and, more elusively, the educated public who come to sociology out of their own curiosity. I hope to reach that audience without condescending or holding back important ideas because they defy oversimplification. Yet I have written this for newcomers to sociology, avoiding jargon and the professional idiom in favor of clear language and fertile examples.

This is a book with a purpose. The term *critical inquiry* in the title means that the book takes a critical stance on sociology and society. I am critical of social inequality meted out along lines of social class, race, gender, and prestige. Similarly, I criticize varieties of sociology that ignore inequality by celebrating a vaguely alternative "value integration" or justify it according to some "function" it presumably performs in society. More importantly, critical sociology differs from a descriptive, applied, or theoretical sociology by going to the roots of historical and contemporary social practices. Critical sociology is not always grim. It looks for alternatives to pernicious social practices, particularly those alternatives fashioned in the struggles of classes and communities.

Each succeeding chapter develops this central idea from a different point of view. Part I provides the equipment that sociology uses to interpret and investigate society. Chapter 1 begins with a concise history of sociology, suggesting that the discipline enjoys a classical tradition and a distinctive perspective of the world. Sociology is not a new science. The classical tradition began with the inheritors of the French Revolution, was perfected in different ways by Karl Marx and Max Weber, refashioned for North American use by Thorstein Veblen

and C. Wright Mills, and is alive in sociological practice today. Chapter 2 describes and illustrates how sociologists actually do their work—what the sociological method means in practice and the unity of this method across a range of techniques appropriate to different research problems. The subsequent chapters clarify this perspective by applying it to specific topics. Chapters 3–5 of Part II treat the basic dimensions of segmentation in modern society: the rural–urban divide, the crucial concepts social class and status group that are fundamental bases of social organization and inequality. Here, as in most chapters, the concepts and explanations are developed in close connection with historical and contemporary society. Chapters 6–8 in Part III turn from segmentation to the principal forms of social integration in the modern world: the state, world system, and social control. Chapter 6 treats a key problem too often ignored in sociological analysis—namely, the state mediates political struggles over class and status, assuming some autonomy in the process. Chapter 7 describes how today's developed and Third World societies are increasingly ensnared in a world system that affects the individual's daily life. Chapter 8 explains how efforts to control society are implemented along lines of privilege, how those efforts change, and how people resist or rebel against them. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the volume by addressing the purposes of social science in connection with ideas about civil society and moral obligation.

This book began as an effort to convey a sense of the sociological craft to a wide audience. That proved more demanding and time-consuming than I had anticipated. In the process of revising the original manuscript, I received helpful criticism from my colleague Gary Hamilton and reviewers who commented on draft chapters: Shelley Coverman, George Kilpatrick, Peter Heller, and Vincent Jeffries. I am especially grateful to Edwin Lemert who shared his demurs with my critical treatment of North American sociology, which he has done so much to help build. I appreciate his friendship and example.

The first edition of this book was published by Dorsey Press, and the second edition comes soon after the acquisition of Dorsey by Wadsworth. As consulting editor, Charles Bonjean has been unfailingly supportive and generous with his advice. Anne Knowles and Betty Duncan-Todd gracefully edited the manuscript. I am grateful to York Bradshaw (Ohio State University), Bruce Ergood (Ohio University), Michael Kennedy (University of Michigan), and Philip McMichael (Cornell University)—all of whom offered useful suggestions for this revised second edition published by Wadsworth.

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PART I

THEORY AND METHOD

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The Sociological Tradition

Thorstein Veblen was the first major North American social theorist but found it difficult to hold academic posts. As John Dos Passos said, "there seemed no place for a masterless man." (Painting by Edwin Burrage Child, with permission of Culver Pictures, Inc.)

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Sociology excites a unique set of reactions—it bores some and frightens others. Doubtless it kindles additional moods, including the passion of a few, but sociology is extraordinary because it can be regarded as both trivial and threatening. This anomaly suggests, at least to a sociologist, that there is more here than meets the eye.

Consider the following loosely connected facts. Before a national television audience in the United States, an eminent broadcast journalist, the now retired Eric Sevareid, once referred to sociology as slow journalism. Yet only a few years before in 1967, the Greek military junta abolished the teaching of sociology as a menace to the right-wing "Heleno–Christian Revolution." Socialist revolutions have also found reason to outlaw sociology. It virtually disappeared from the Soviet Union under Stalin and was banned for a time after 1952 in China, in both cases owing to its contaminating influence on the "science" of Marxism–Leninism. Despite these credentials, exponents of plain speaking such as journalist Edwin Newman grumble that "a large part of social science practice consists of taking clear ideas and making them opaque" (1974, p. 174). Beginning in the 1920s, however, Mussolini's government purged Italian universities of sociologists whose criticism of fascism was all too clear. How is it that the same subject can arouse fears of subversion and state repression in some settings and a smug indifference in others?

An appreciation of the nature of sociology and these diverse perceptions requires some description of the discipline's special perspective and history. That is the purpose of this chapter. Beginning on a necessarily formal note, **sociology** is defined as the study of group life and those aspects of individual lives that are affected by social interaction.

The **sociological perspective** differs from the way we view the world as individuals; this perspective differs in ways that require us to step outside but never abandon personal experience and to gain a new vantage on the world. The reason for doing so is simple: There are many features of social life that cannot be explained otherwise. This principle is demonstrated in the phenomenon of suicide. Individuals under-