



Sociology

CONCEPTS & USES

JONATHAN H. TURNER

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University of California, Riverside

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*SOCIOLOGY
Concepts and Uses*

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About the Author

JOHNATHAN H. TURNER is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Riverside where he has taught sociology for twenty-five years. He is the author of two dozen books, plus the editor of several more, and he has published articles in most of sociology's major journals. He has been associate editor for most of the major journals in sociology, and he is currently editor of the journal, *Sociological Perspectives*. He has also served on the editorial board of the University of California Press.

Although his primary interest is in developing sociological theory, he has maintained an active research agenda in several more specific areas of specialization, including inequality and stratification, ethnic group relations, bioecology, social change, social institutions, and American society. He is also of the belief that scientific sociology and humanistic social policy are highly compatible enterprises. This short introduction to sociology is designed to communicate both the substance and relevance of sociology—as a science, as a practical vocation, and at times, as an advocacy.

Preface

For over twenty-five years I have taught introductory sociology. Indeed, it has always been my favorite course. Yet, I have always been a bit frustrated over the kinds of texts available, including the ones that I have written. Not all instructors, and certainly not all students, want or need a large and lavishly produced text, which, in the end, costs the student a fortune and limits the ability of instructors to assign additional books and materials in their course. They would prefer, perhaps, a “plain wrapper” or “generic brand” text which lacks the gloss, color, and high price of a regular text but which, at the same time, covers the basic subjects of the standard introductory course. It is for these instructors and students that this book was written.

My goal was simple: write a short text that communicates the same amount of basic information of a larger text and, at the same time, deliver it at a cost that is substantially below all large hard-cover texts and smaller paperback texts as well. To do this, I took out the pictures, cartoons, four-color graphics, glossy pages, suggested readings, and “filler” of a large text. And I collapsed related subjects together to reduce the number of total chapters and pages, but without a significant loss of coverage.

My feeling is that it is rather easy to “get lost” in many texts, as one sorts through graphics, pictures, inserts, margin notes, and other features of these books. Indeed, it is often hard to find the running text without searching for it. While these extra materials are, no doubt, interesting, I am not sure that justice is done to our field. It might be better, I think, to simply lay out in a coherent and easy-to-follow way the basic concepts and approaches of sociology as a discipline, without distracting the reader. In fact, I think that this approach can be even more interesting, for two principal reasons: First, students can get through chapters much more quickly and, as a result, more readily absorb and retain material. Second, students can see that there is coherence to what sociologists study because they are not taken off on tangents as they read along. In a sense, I think that we insult students with the presumption that we must constantly entertain them with extra materials. In contrast, I believe that sociology, per se,

is interesting without all of the filler and fluff. We do not need to make our texts like MTV.

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Jonathan H. Turner

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The Nature and Origins of Sociology



When the social world undergoes dramatic changes, as illustrated by the transformation of the landscape with industrialization, people begin to think about the world around them. How could they account for these dramatic and sudden changes, as the old feudal order gave way to a new way of organizing the social world? It is in this context that sociology was born, as scholars increasingly came to see society as something that could be analyzed systematically.

THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is the study of human social behavior, interaction, and organization. In a very real sense we are all sociologists because you and I are always analyzing our behaviors and our interpersonal experiences with others in organized situations. The goal of sociology is to make these everyday understandings of the social world more systematic and precise, while extending the depth and breadth of insights beyond our personal experiences. For, we are simply small players in a large and complex world of other people, symbols, and social structures, and only by extending our perspective beyond the here and now can we come to appreciate fully the forces shaping and constraining our lives.

This emphasis on constraint often runs against the personal beliefs of many Americans who like to view themselves as rugged individuals, using their free will and initiative to shape their destiny. To a degree, we can all do so, but we are never totally free of constraints. We must operate in a social environment that profoundly influences how we feel about ourselves and the world around us, how we see and perceive events, how we act and think, and how far and where we can go in life. At times, this constraint is obvious, even oppressive and debilitating; more often it is subtle and even unacknowledged. Yet it is there, constantly shaping our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Examine the situation of a college student. There are broad cultural values and beliefs emphasizing the importance of education and, thereby, forcing students to perceive and believe that they *must* go to college. For some, there may be parental pressures and expectations, making these pressures to go to school even greater. There are the constraints of school itself—class attendance, reading lists, exams—circumscribing what one can do. There are pressures of class background—how much money one has to spend—determining whether a student must also work while going to school. And, if work is necessary, there are the constraints of the workplace itself, as well as the problems of scheduling and reconciling school and work. There may be one's own family of spouse and children further cramping a busy schedule. There are the constraints of the economy and job market affecting students' decisions about their college major and life goals. There are governmental forces affecting funding for students (tuition, loans, grants, fellowships) and for the college or university as a whole. These governmental and economic constraints are, in turn, tied to the world political economy as balances of geopolitical power and economic trade ebb and flow. The point, I hope, is clear: All of us live in a complex web of forces dictating so much of what we see, feel, and do. None of us is a free agent; true, we can pick and choose our way through daily life, but our options are always limited.

Sociology examines these constraints, and as such, it is a very broad field, for it studies all the cultural symbols that humans create and use to interact and to organize society; it explores all the social structures that order social life; it examines all the processes, such as deviance, crime, dissent, riots, migrations, and social movements, that flow through the social order; and it attempts to

understand the transformations that these processes work on culture and social structure.

In changing times, where culture and structure are undergoing dramatic transformations, sociology becomes especially relevant (Nisbet, 1969). As old ways of doing things change, personal lives are disrupted, and as a result, people seek answers as to why the routines and formulas of the past no longer work. The world today is undergoing dramatic transformation—the collapse of the Soviet empire, the rise of volatile ethnic relations, the flight of jobs to countries with lower-priced labor, the shifting fortunes of commerce and trade, the difficulty of financing government services, the changing job market, the spread of a deadly disease (autoimmune deficiency syndrome—AIDS), the increase in famine with overpopulation, the disruption of ecological balances, the redefinition of gender roles for men and women, and many other changes. As long as social life and daily routines hum along, the need for sociological insight is not fully appreciated. But when the basic fabric of the society and culture changes, people seek sociological knowledge. This is true not only today, but it was the very reason that sociology emerged in the first place as a distinct discipline in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Humans have, no doubt, thought about themselves and the universe throughout history. Yet it was not until the late eighteenth century that a confluence of events in Europe set the stage for the emergence of sociology. As the old feudal estates began to give way to free labor moving into industry in urban areas and as new forms of government began to break the hold of monarchies, the foundations of society—employment and income, living arrangements, community, family, and religion—were being altered forever. As might be expected, people were worried about the new emerging order, and they began to think more systematically about what all the changes meant for the future (Turner, Beeghley, and Powers, 1989).

The resulting intellectual movement is sometimes termed **the Enlightenment** because the hold of religion, tradition, and dogma on intellectual thinking was finally broken. Science could now emerge fully as a way of thinking about the world, and physics and, later, biology were able to overcome persecution by religious elites and establish themselves as a path to knowledge. Along with the growing influence of science came a burst of thinking about the social universe. Much of this thought was speculative, pondering the nature of humans and the first societies unfiltered by the complexity of the modern world. Some of this thought was moralistic, but not in a religious sense. Rather the proper type of society and the fundamental relationship of individuals to one another and to society were reevaluated in ways consistent with the economic and political changes wrought by the spread of commerce and then industrialization. In England, this kind of thinking was termed the *Age of*

Reason; and scholars like Adam Smith (1776), who first articulated the laws of supply and demand in the marketplace, also pondered the effects on society of rapid population growth, of escalating economic specialization, of declining community, and of weakening moral sentiments. In France, a group of thinkers known as **the philosophes** also began to expound a vision of the social world that championed a society where individuals were free from arbitrary political authority and were guided by agreed-upon moral standards and democratic government.

Yet another force behind the emergence of sociology—the French Revolution of 1789—accelerated systematic thinking about the social world. The violence of the revolution was a shock to all of Europe, for if such violence and force could throw out the old regime, what was to replace it? How could society be reconstructed in order to avoid such cataclysmic events? It is at this point, in the decades around the turn of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, that sociology as a self-conscious discipline was forged.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and the Founding of Sociology

The long French legacy of the Enlightenment and the shock waves of the French Revolution led Auguste Comte in his five-volume *Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842) to sound the call for a discipline devoted to the scientific study of



Auguste Comte
(1798–1857)

society. Comte wanted to call this discipline “social physics” to emphasize that it would study the fundamental nature of the social universe, but he was eventually forced to settle on the Latin-Greek hybrid term, *sociology*.

The central problem for sociology was the one that had been articulated by earlier thinkers in the Enlightenment: How is society to be held together as it becomes larger, more complex, more varied, more differentiated, more specialized, and more partitioned? Comte’s answer was that common ideas and beliefs—a *consensus universalis*, in his terms—needed to be developed to give society a “universal” morality. This answer was never developed, but the concern with symbols and culture as a unifying force was to remain the mainstay of French sociological thinking, right up to the present day.

Comte’s main contribution to the development of sociology was not so much the substance of his ideas, but his strong advocacy for the acceptance of sociology as a legitimate field of study. Establishing a new discipline is never easy, because there are always some vested interests opposed to new ways of thinking. This was to be a discipline devoted to the study of society, and the old academic disciplines, such as philosophy, ethics, theology, and law, were threatened by this newcomer. Thus it was that Comte spent much of his monumental work justifying the right of sociology to even exist.

One tactic that Comte employed to make sociology seem legitimate was to postulate a **law of the three stages** in which thinking is considered to move along in an evolutionary sequence. The first stage is the *theological*, where thought about the world is dominated by considerations of the supernatural, religion, and god; the second stage is the *metaphysical*, where appeals to the supernatural are replaced by philosophical thought about the essence of phenomena and by the development of mathematics, logic, and other neutral thought systems; and the third stage was to be the *positivistic* where science, or the careful observation of empirical facts and the systematic testing of theories, become the dominant modes for accumulating knowledge. And with the positivistic stage, knowledge *can be used* for practical purposes to better people’s lives.

Society as a whole, as well as thinking about each domain of the universe, moves through these three stages, but at different rates: astronomy and physics move first, then chemistry and biology, and finally sociology emerges as the last mode of thinking to enter the positivistic stage. In Comte’s eyes, the analysis of society was ready to take a seat at the table of science—a claim which was challenged in Comte’s time, as well as today. And as the laws of human organization were developed, Comte (1851–1854) believed that they could be used to better the human condition—again, a theme as controversial today as in Comte’s time.

A second legitimating tactic employed by Comte was to postulate a **hierarchy of the sciences** in which all the sciences were ranked in terms of their complexity and their movement into the positivistic stage. At the bottom of the hierarchy was mathematics, the language of all sciences higher in the hierarchy, and at the top, emerging out of biology, was sociology, which in a moment of overexuberance Comte proclaimed as “the queen science.” For, if sociology was