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A CANADIAN INTRODUCTION

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> Sylvia Hale St. Thomas University Fredericton

Preface

The initial impetus for this text came from a plan to develop a Canadian edition of a British text, The Problem of Sociology by David Lee and Howard Newby (Hutchinson 1983). The Canadianization seemed warranted by the outstanding qualities of the original British text. In many ways, it represented a radical departure from the traditional format of North American introductions to sociology. Gone were the token chapters on "great names" and the ubiquitous lists of social institutions. Instead, students were introduced to sociology as a theoretical discipline, grounded in a long historical and intellectual tradition in which controversies and empirical research are fundamental.

Each section of the British book presented a sophisticated, in-depth treatment of theory. Institutions such as education, family, religion, bureaucracy, deviance, and so on, were all represented, but as empirical tests of theory rather than as specialized entities within a structural model of society. The major achievement of the text was that it systematically applied sociological theory to the analysis of contemporary industrial capitalist society. The consistently high quality of Lee and Newby's book, their organizing focus around theories of industrial society, and their empirical testing of theories with contemporary data, all provided a challenging framework for an introductory course.

Using this text for an introductory sociology course in a Canadian university, however, proved frustrating. The historical order of the presentation of theories, combined with their complexity and the absence of specifically Canadian data, made it difficult for the average Canadian student to absorb the material. The historical framework that was used by Lee and Newby meant that contemporary theories came last. We

thought it desirable to engage students in actively debating the comparative merits of different perspectives right from the beginning. Not only was it necessary to introduce structural functionalism—which has long dominated North American sociology and introductory sociology texts—right at the outset, but feminist and social constructionist theories had to be presented as well. In this way, students could relate their immediate personal experiences to what they were studying because these interactive perspectives in effect bridge the gap between microand macrosociological theory.

These changes, combined with the need to include Canadian data, were too far-reaching to be accomplished by a cut-and-paste Canadianization. Hence, Controversies in Sociology. Even the chapters on classical theorists such as Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, which still bear some structural resemblance to the corresponding chapters in Lee and Newby, had to be substantially altered. They had to reflect the present text's concern with integrating the four theoretical approaches of structural functionalism, Marxism, feminism, and social constructionism into each section of the book.

The data that we present in this book are not treated as "facts," but as tests of different sociological theories. Throughout this text, students are encouraged to develop their critical skills instead of passively absorbing material. We believe that such a goal constitutes a striking difference between Controversies in Sociology and other Canadian sociology textbooks. It is in this regard that the book remains true to the fundamental conception of Lee and Newby that students should be introduced to sociology as the study of a body of theory, rather than as a collection of rapidly changing descriptive data.

Introduction

This text presents sociology as a way of questioning experience rather than as an accumulation of factual knowledge. The objective is to stimulate discussion and to assist students in developing their capacity to think critically about society rather than simply to memorize facts. Theory is accorded central importance and is utilized throughout the text as the basis for exploring all substantive issues.

The text is organized around the comparative application of a range of contemporary theories to problems of industrial capitalist society, with special reference to Canada. It introduces the four broad theoretical perspectives of functionalism, Marxism, the social construction of reality, and feminism, tracing their roots in the works of Durkheim, Marx, Parsons, and Weber. We study the founding fathers' contribution to, and continuing relevance for, a variety of contemporary theories and analyses. The main body of the text combines theory, methodology, and evidence throughout and tries to explain the basis of controversies in sociology. Different chapters present a comparative application of the four major theoretical approaches to the substantive issues of the microsociology of everyday life, community life in rural and urban contexts, religion, suicide, crime and industrial conflict, political economy, stratification, family, education, racial and ethnic relations, development and change, and bureaucracy. Each of these topics is studied as an arena for debate between competing theories rather than as a body of factual knowledge that can be taken as given. The text has no chapter devoted exclusively to women's issues. Such issues are treated as an integral part of human concerns and are given systematic attention in each chapter.

Each substantive chapter illustrates the

close relationship between theory, method, and what is taken to be factual information. The theoretical perspectives focus on different aspects of a problem or conceptualize the nature of the problem in very different ways. Hence, the major critique of one approach or one body of data is to juxtapose it systematically with constrasting theories that search for different kinds of data. Throughout the text, the critique of ethnomethodology—that there can be no such thing as disembodied facts separate from the interpretive frameworks that give them meaning—is taken seriously. Feminist theory is similarly critical in showing that much that has been taken for objective information about humanity is in reality ideological, serving to cover up the experiences of half of humanity and to distort the experience of the other half.

The goal of the text is not to propound one theoretical perspective over others. Rather, the text presents substantive material in such a way that students can see how sociologists use their theories and their research techniques to investigate topics. It shows how the assumptions that underlie these different approaches systematically influence how questions are asked and what kind of data is sought. The ultimate aim is to challenge students to debate competing explanations and theories and so to encourage them to participate actively in sociology as critical readers of theory and research.

Part I of the text introduces the problem of sociology as a discipline and the controversies in theory and research methods that pervade it. Chapter 1 explores the nature of the sociological imagination, defined by C. Wright Mills (1959) as the ability to use information in a critical way to achieve an understanding of what is going on in the

world and what may be happening within one's own life experience.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of major theoretical approaches in sociology, outlining their key assumptions, the similarities and differences among them, and how they both complement and challenge each other. The goal is to encourage students to develop a critical comparative approach from the very beginning of the course. This makes possible a flexible order in the presentation of material in the text. Teachers may opt to juxtapose this overview chapter with any of the substantive problem areas explored in later chapters and so engage students in debate over comparative approaches to problems in the first weeks of the class. They can then return to questions of method or to specific theories in more depth without affecting the continuity of the text.

Chapter 3 on methodology stresses that there is no definitive method for doing research in sociology. The appropriateness of the approach is determined by the theoretical perspective and the major questions that are the focus of the study. The objective of this chapter is not to teach students how to do research, but rather to alert them, as critical readers and consumers of research, to the strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots of each technique.

Part II of the text consists of four chapters that explore fundamental questions on the nature of social cohesion and order in industrial society. Chapter 4 on the microsociology of everyday life is in many ways pivotal for the text. It encourages students to relate sociological inquiry to their immediate experience of interpersonal relations, exploring how different perspectives relate the microworld of everyday interaction to the macrolevel of social structures. It introduces ethnomethodology, which lies at the foundation of the social construction of reality perspective. Chapter 5 on rural and urban communities is also designed to relate directly to students' personal experience and

to challenge common assumptions concerning the ideals of rural life and the loss of community spirit in urban or metropolitan centres. The chapter demonstrates how the folk/urban thesis implies certain assumptions that, in turn, imply consequences that can be tested against evidence. The general conclusion, that the evidence falsifies the assumptions, places in doubt the pervasive notion of contrasts between rural and urban life and emphasizes the general need to question taken for granted assumptions about society.

The subsequent two chapters on cohesion and morality, and their breakdown in anomie, disorder, and conflict, are oriented around Durkheim's analysis of social order. They introduce the notion of anomie and the constrasting, and yet closely related, concept of alienation, suggesting that anomie, or the breakdown of moral order, may be generated by alienating, unjust social structures. The discussion of suicide and religion, two central topics in Durkheim's work, facilitates a critical introduction to the social construction of reality perspective. We learn that what Durkheim took to be factual data—suicide rates—are themselves socially constructed through the decision-making processes of coroners, Catholic priests, and bureaucrats who kept the records of deaths in various communities. Feminist theory similarly challenges the interpretations based on data that show relatively high suicide rates by males compared to females. Feminist theory also challenges Durkheimian and Marxist theories of the nature of religion in society.

Chapter 7 examines deviance and crime, an area of study fraught with controversy and unanswered questions. Anomie theory, focussing on morality and the breakdown of values, is pitted against Marxist theories of alienation and exploitation, in attempts to account for the higher rates of crime among the lower classes. Labelling theory and related social constructionist approaches

question whether evidence on differential crime rates by social class is factual or is merely an artifact of how labels are applied and who is picked on by law enforcement officers. Current feminist theory casts in doubt almost the entire range of theories of crime—conservative, radical, and social constuctionist—because they fail to account for the vast differences in criminal behaviour between women and men.

Part III of the text focusses specifically on Marx's theory of capitalism. By this stage in the text, readers will already be familiar with the problems of inequality, exploitation, and alienation associated with Marxist interpretations of capitalism. This section explores in more detail the theory of the contradictions of capitalism developed by Marx and current efforts to reformulate classical structuralist-Marxist theory. Social constructionist theory explores how the social reality of structures of capitalism is actually produced through the everyday activities of people in their working lives. Marxist-feminist and radical-feminist theories raise the challenge that relations of reproduction and patriarchy need to be integrated into the study of class and genderclass relations. Chapter 9 systematically tests the predictions based on Marx's theory of the contradictions of capitalism against evidence of the political economy of Canada. It points out both the powerful explanatory utility of the model and its ultimate limitations.

Part IV of the text begins with a detailed exposition of Parsons' model of a social

system. The next five chapters all have the same format, exploring research on the specific subjects of family, stratification, education, race and ethnic relations, and development and change. In each chapter, the classical functionalist approach developed by Parsons is pitted against structuralist-Marxist theory that relates the same substantive issues to the workings of capitalism. Both these macrosociological perspectives are then challenged and modified by contemporary theories that look at how this macro reality is socially constructed in the intimate, everyday activities of people. Feminist theory focusses on the relations of patriarchy that pervade these institutions.

Part V of the text is qualitatively different. It is organized around the critical issues of rationality and bureaucracy that are central to Weber's work. Weber merges the interpretive perspective with a macrohistorical analysis and critical appraisal of capitalism and bureaucratic organizations. The final chapter presents a synthesis of various approaches. The conceptual boundaries between systems theory and Marxism, interpretive perspectives and feminism. break down as we analyse bureaucracy, which is pervasive in both capitalist and communist societies. This analysis raises multiple questions about whether rationality and the associated values of science and technology are fundamentally irrational. It leaves us with a host of questions that sociologists are only beginning to formulate.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements xv Preface xvii Introduction xix

PART I: AN OVERVIEW OF SOCIOLOGY

Chapter 1: The Sociological Imagination 2
The Promise of Sociology 2
Sociology and the Scientific Ideal 7
Suggested Reading 11

Chapter 2: An Overview of Theories 12

The Origins of Sociology 12

The Rise of Capitalism 13
The Industrial Revolution 14

Controversies in Sociological Thought 16

Sociology as History 16

The Problem of Order: Systems Theory and Structural-

Functionalist Analysis 18

Basic Assumptions of Systems Theory 20

Culture and Role Integration 23

The Problem of Conflict: Conflict Theory and Political

Economy 26

Interpretive Sociology: Symbolic Interaction and

Ethnomethodology 31

Symbolic Interaction Theory 33

Ethnomethodology 37

Feminist Theory 39

Conclusion 45

Suggested Reading 46

Chapter 3: A Critical Look at Methodologies 48

Experiments 49

Survey Research 52

Census Data and Government Records 57

Statistical Analysis 59

Participant Observation 60

Unobtrusive Measures 63

Ethics of Research 66

Conclusion 68

Suggested Reading 68

PART II: SOCIAL COHESION AND ORDER IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Chapter 4: The Microsociology of Everyday Life by Peter A.D. Weeks 70

Microsociology from the Functionalist Perspective 72

Limitations of Functionalist Analysis 74

Microsociology in the Structuralist-Marxist Tradition 74

Limitations of Structuralist-Marxist Analysis 76

Microsociology from the Interpretive Perspective 77

Ethnomethodology 78

Background Understandings and Indexicality 81

The Documentary Method of Interpretation 85

Practical Reasoning and the Social Construction of Order 88

The Social Construction of Gender 91

Conversation Analysis 95

Ethnomethodological Studies of Work 97

Limitations of Ethnomethodology 100

The Personal as Political: Feminist Theory and the Social

Construction of Reality 101

Limitations of Personal Politics 104

Conclusion 104

Suggested Reading 105

Chapter 5: Loss of Community? The Rural-Urban

Debate 106

Loss of Community 107

Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: Community and Association 107

The Chicago School 109

The Urban Agglomeration 110

Folk Society: A Test of the Chicago School Thesis 113

Contemporary Rural Communities 118

Urban Communities: The Myth of Anomie 120

The Inner City 122

Suburbia: The Gender Ghetto 125

A Re-orientation of Theory: Political Economy and Feminism 127

Political Economy Analysis 127

A Challenge from Feminist Theory 132

An Integrated Political Economy 134

Conclusion 135

Suggested Reading 136

Chapter 6: Cohesion and Morality: A Critical Look at Durkheim 137

THE EMERGENCE OF THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SOCIETY 137

Auguste Comte and Positive Society 138

Problems with Comte 139

Herbert Spencer and Social Evolution 140

Problems with Spencer 141

DURKHEIM'S THEORY OF MORALITY AND COHESION 142

The Scientific Study of Morality 143

Societies Based on Mechanical Solidarity 145

Transition in Forms of Society 146

Societies Based on Organic Solidarity 146

Problems with Durkheim 147

Anomic Division of Labour 149

SUICIDE 150

Suicide and the Loss of Social Cohesion 150

The Marxist Critique 153

Suicide Among Women 154

The Ethnomethodological Critique 156

RELIGION 160

Elementary Forms of Religious Life 160

Durkheim and Contemporary Functionalist Theory of Religion 162

Religion and Class 163

Marxist Theory 163

Max Weber's Contribution 164

The Distinctive Religion of the Capitalist Class 166

Puritanism and the Working Class 167

The Social Gospel in Canada 169

Feminist Critiques of Religion 172

Conclusion 176

Suggested Reading 177

Chapter 7: Anomie: The Roots of Industrial

Conflict and Crime 179

Durkheim's Theoretical Legacy 179

DISORDER AND CONFLICT IN LABOUR RELATIONS 181

The Human Relations School of Management 181

The Synthesis of Alienation and Anomie 183

Anomie and Unjust Contracts 184

Canadian Labour Relations 185

Procedural Justice 185

Substantive Justice 188

Patterns of Labour Unrest 191

Summary 192

DEVIANCE AND CRIME 192

Functionalist Theories of Deviance and Crime 193

The Anomie Theory of Crime 193

viii CONTENTS Subcultural Variations in Crime 195 Gang Subculture 196 **Marxist Theories of Crime** 199 Marxism and Anomie 199 Laws for the Capitalist Class 200 Defining Crime: Illegal Behavior or Social Harm? 202 Crime and Politics 205 Critique of Marxist Theory 205 Interpretive Theories of Deviance and Crime 206 Crime as Defining Group Boundaries 207 Deviance as the Product of Labelling 208 Racism and the Policing Process 211 Labelling Women Offenders 213 The Limitations of Labelling Theory 217 Victims of Crimes Without Lables 218 Crime and Patriarchy: A Feminist Overview of Criminology 223 Conclusion 224 Suggested Reading 225

PART III: POLITICAL ECONOMY: THE MARXIST CHALLENGE

Chapter 8: Karl Marx and the Analysis of Capitalism 228

Historical Materialism 228

Class Relations and Modes of Production 229 Capitalism and Technological Progress 231

Alienation Under Capitalism 234

The Model of Capitalism as an Economic System 235

The Theory of Exchange 236

Labour Commodity and Surplus Value 237

Law of the Falling Rate of Profit 240

Crisis of Overproduction 240

Contradictions of Capitalism 241

Counteracting Factors 241

The Base-Superstructure Debate: Materialism versus

Idealism 243

Classical Economics as Ideology 244

Dialectical Method 246

The Class Struggle 247

Contemporary Marxist Theory 248

Marxist Structuralism 249

The Social Construction of Reality and Destructuralism 249 Marxist Feminism and Radical Feminism 250

Conclusion 251

Suggested Reading 252

Chapter 9: The Political Economy of Canada: "The Main Business" 253

Marx and the Contradictions of Capitalism 253

The Liberal-Bourgeois Thesis 254

THE STRUCTURE OF CAPITALISM 256

Corporate Monopoly Capitalism 256

Horizontal Mergers 257

Vertical Integration 258

Conglomerate Mergers 258

Intercorporate Ownership and Control 260

Interlocking Directorships 260

A Critique of the Liberal-Bourgeois Thesis 261

The Petite Bourgeoisie 262

Farming 262

Fishing and Forestry 264

Summary 266

CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRACY 266

Domination or Pluralism? 266

Legitimation and Ideological Hegemony 269

Mechanisms for Legitimation 270

The Communications Industry 271

Summary 272

THE STRUCTURE OF CLASSES 273

The Rich 274

Welfare for the Ultra Rich 274

The Poor 276

Unemployment Figures 276

Subsistence Wages: The Working Poor 277

Poverty Among Women and Children 279

Welfare to the Poor 280

Quality of Life of the Poor 280

The Poorest 282

The Affluent Middle Classes 284

The Embourgeoisement Thesis 284

The Professional and Managerial Class 286

Limits to the Traditional Marxist Thesis 287

The Controversial Character of the Middle Class 287

The New Middle Class in Marxist Theory 289

THE MARXIST-FEMINIST CHALLENGE TO POLITICAL

ECONOMY 290

Women: The Marginal Topic 290

The Domestic Labour Debate 292

Political Economy from the Standpoint of Women 293

Housework 296

The Formation of Class 297

x CONTENTS

The Ruling Apparatus of Capitalism 298
Summary 299
Conclusion 299
Suggested Reading 300

PART IV: TRADITIONAL THEORY UNDER ATTACK

Chapter 10: Talcott Parsons and Functionalist Theory 304

The Analogy Between Biological and Social Systems 304 Parsons' Model of a Social System 306

Roles and the Social System 308

Role Theory 308

The Social System in a General Scheme of Action 309

System Prerequisites 310

Pattern Variables 312

Modernization 315

Problems with Functionalist Theory 316 Critical Reformulations of Functionalist Theory 319

Marxist Functionalism 319

Psychoanalysis and Socialization 321

The Ethnomethodological Critique 322

Conclusion 323

Suggested Reading 324

Chapter 11: The Family: The Site of Love, Exploitation, and Oppression 325

Functionalist Theories of the Family 326

Critique of Functionalist Theory 329

Monolithic Bias 329

Conservative Bias 333

Sexist Bias 334

Microstructural Bias 335

Marxist Theories of the Family 335

The Marxist Theory of Patriarchy 335

Capitalism and Family Forms in Canada 336

The Social Construction of Class Relations in the Home 337

The Radical Feminist Critique: Capitalism or

Patriarchy? 340

The Roots of Male Power 341

Limits to Economic Freedom for Women 343

Domestic Violence 344

Custody Battles: Shared Parenting or Patriarchal

Control? 346

Medical and Legal Control over Reproduction 347

v	٦

The Abortion Debate: Pro-life or Pro-patriarchy? 348 Limitations of Radical Feminism 352 Conclusion 353 Suggested Reading 353 Chapter 12: Stratification: Meritocracy as Ideology 354 Functionalist Theory: Stratification as Meritocracy 355 Critique of Functionalism 356 Equal Opportunity 356 Unequal Importance 357 Women and Stratification 357 Relative Scarcity of Personnel 358 Motivation 359 Marxist Theory: Inequality as Class Exploitation 360 The Structure of Unequal Opportunities 360 Credentialism as Ideology 361 The Deskilling of Work 362 Skilled Labour Under Capitalism 363 The Radical Feminist Critique: Gender Hierarchy as Patriarchy 365 Women as an Underclass 365 Perpetuating the Gender-Class Hierarchy 368 Prospects for Change and Resistance 371 The Social Construction of Superiority and Inferiority 374 Coping with Inequality 377 Conclusion 378 Suggested Reading 379 Chapter 13: Education: Does It Moderate or Perpetuate Social Inequality? 380 Functionalism: The Liberal Theory of Education 381 The Ideal of Liberal Education 381 The Functions of Schools 381 Equality and Educational Opportunity 383 Functionalist Explanations for Class and Gender Bias in Educational Attainment 386 Structuralist-Marxist Theory: Schooling in Capitalist Society 390 Structural Correspondence Theory 393 Historical Correspondence Between Schooling and Capitalism 393 Educational Reform: The Losing Battle? Education for Native Peoples 398 The Structuralist-Marxist Thesis Reconsidered 402 The Social Construction of Schooling 404

The Classroom Experience for Students 404

Capitalism 462

Control Over Capital 464
Patterns of Investment 465
Market Relations 466

The Social Construction of Teaching 406 Reaction and Resistance 408 Limitations in the Social Constructionalist Approach 409 Radical Curriculum Theory 411 Feminist Theory as Radical Curriculum: A Language of Possibility 411 Feminist Teaching and Resistance 412 Minority Culture as Critical Pedagogy 418 Conclusion 419 Suggested Reading 420 Chapter 14: Race and Ethnic Relations: Creating the Vertical Mosaic 422 Traditional Functionalism: Consensus or Conflict? 422 Implications for Political Organization 425 Domination 425 Separation 427 Integration Through Assimilation 429 Limitations of Traditional Functionalism 430 Power and Class Struggle in the Ethnic Mosaic 433 Structuralist-Marxist Theory 434 Reformulations of Structuralist-Marxist Theory 436 Ethnicity and Political Struggle 438 The Social Construction of Ethnicity, Gender, and Class 441 Ethnicity as a Process 441 Gender Bias in Immigration 444 Institutional Ethnography: The Accomplishment of Gender-Ethnic-Class 446 Refugee Status as a Social Accomplishment 450 Conclusion 452 Suggested Reading 453 Chapter 15: Development: Competing Theories of Social Change 455 WORLD DEVELOPMENT 456 Functionalist Theory: Modernization as Evolution 456 Cultural Lag 457 The Culture of Poverty 457 The Modernization Thesis Discredited 459 Marxist Theory: Underdevelopment as Capitalist Exploitation 459 Capitalism in the Third World 460 Dependency Theory: The Contradictions Within

Labour Market Relations 466

Force 467

Foreign Aid: Philanthropy or Commercial Interests? 467

Agribusiness and Famine 469

Patriarchy: The Underdevelopment of Women 471

A New Vision of Development 472

DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA 473

Canadian Development in a World Capitalist System 473
Native Peoples: Development or Economic Imperialism? 474
Regional Disparities and Underdevelopment in Canada 476
The Free Trade Deal and the Future Development of Canada 478

The Subsidies Debate 481

The Costs of Economic Rationality: Arguments Against Free

Trade 482

Concentration of Capital 482

Investment Patterns 484

The Costs of Specialization 485

Market Relations 485

Labour Relations 486

Force 487

The Social Costs of Economic Rationality 488

Free Trade Reconsidered: Alternatives for

Development 491

The Threatened Environment 492

Industrial Agriculture 494

Industrial Pollution 494

Conclusion 497

Suggested Reading 500

PART V: RATIONALITY AND BUREAUCRATIC SOCIETY

Chapter 16: Max Weber and Rationality in Western Culture 504

Background 504

Weber's Scholarship 505

Weber's Methodological Contribution 506

Methodology in Social Science 506

The Study of Meaning 506

Human Agency 508

Causal Pluralism 509

Ideal-Type Constructs 509

Objectivity in Social Science 509

Weber's Substantive Contribution 511

Types of Action Orientation 511

Model of Authority 512

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