

INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY

A Critical Approach



Third Edition

MURRAY KNUTTILA

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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70 Wynford Drive, Don Mills, Ontario M3C 1J9
www.oup.com/ca

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published in Canada
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First published 2005

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Knuttila, Kenneth Murray
Introducing sociology : a critical perspective / Murray
Knuttila. — 3rd ed.

First published as: Sociology revisited : basic concepts and perspectives.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-19-542027-2.—
ISBN-10: 0-19-542027-6

I. Sociology—Textbooks. I. Title.

HM586.K58 2005 301 C2005-901605-1

2 3 4 - 08 07 06 05

Cover Design: Brett J. Miller
Cover Image: Children balance on rail © Black Star

This book is printed on permanent (acid-free) paper ∞.

Printed in Canada

INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY

A Critical Approach

Preface to the Third Edition

On the occasion of the Second Edition I expressed my gratitude at having an opportunity to address the errors and confusions that I may have made in the first edition. What I said then about society still holds true: society is changing faster than we can contemplate. This means that this book, like every other book, or even the information on your computer, is somewhat out of date by the time you use it. The major changes in this Third Edition include the addition of a new chapter on mass communications, as well as efforts to update data where relevant. I have used my own experiences in the interim to facilitate an introduction to this complex subject and discipline in a manner that will allow the reader a better understanding of the daily developments in the world and the discipline of sociology. The overall objective of stimulating systematic and critical thought remains as the guiding principle of the text.

At the completion of the Third Edition I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and Lisa Meschino and her staff at Oxford University Press for their assistance. In particular, I would like to thank Jessica Coffey for outstanding editorial assistance. I am, of course, solely responsible for all errors and omissions.

Some of the material in this volume was first presented in an earlier volume, *Sociology Revisited: Basic Concepts and Perspectives*. As well, some of the ideas—particularly in chapters 8, 11, 14, and 15—are shared from *State Theories: Classical, Global and Feminist Perspectives*, co-authored with Wendee

Kubik. Of course, much of this book was presented in the first two editions of *Introducing Sociology: A Critical Perspective*. The title continues to suggest a double entendre because the reader is asked to be critical of sociology while engaging in the study of a critical sociology. The need for critical thinking in every facet of our lives has never been greater.

No single volume can possibly introduce every aspect of a social science discipline; nevertheless, the material presented allows the reader to begin to grasp some of the essential features of sociological thought. The book is organized into three major sections. Part I overviews the basic concepts employed by sociologists in our efforts to understand human beings and our behaviour. Part II provides a critical overview of key developments in sociological theory, suggesting that recent feminist critiques have placed the entire agenda of previous theoretical work in question. Part III illustrates the nature of sociological analysis. It uses the concepts and theories from Parts I and II to introduce a number of the ways in which sociologists look at specific issues such as social inequality, polity, deviance, ethnic and race relations, familial relations, and globalization.

The overarching theme of each section is 'the promise' of the sociological imagination. We must accept the underlying logic of the work of C. Wright Mills and attempt to ensure that sociological thought, analysis, empirical research, and theory contribute to fulfilling the potential of the discipline by facilitating a greater degree of self-understanding.

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PART I

The Sociological Perspective and the Basic Language of Sociology

In 1959, the late C. Wright Mills began his classic volume *The Sociological Imagination* with a statement that—if you ignore the gender-specific noun—could have been written today. Mills wrote: ‘Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct’ (3). For many of us the task of understanding our lives has never seemed more daunting. Perhaps this is because the world seems to be getting more and more complex, or, perhaps it is because some of us just don’t try very hard. As a species, we have never had so many opportunities to avoid thinking about our lives in spite of the fact that we have never had so much information, literally, at our fingertips. If we accept the convincing argument that Neil Postman presents in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the two phenomena are connected. Postman argues that humans have never had as much access to information as we now do, but that we seem increasingly incapable of translating that information into useful knowledge and understanding, let alone wisdom. Clearly, the survival and well-being of our species requires us to try to make better sense of things.

The book you are about to read has at least two objectives. The first is to stimulate you to think about yourself from the perspective of the discipline of sociology. The second is to provide some concepts, ideas, theories, and data that will facilitate that process. Since the book attempts to introduce you to the discipline of sociology, it starts at the beginning by focusing on the basic language, concepts, assumptions, and premises that the discipline embraces and that sociologists use in their approach to analyzing and understanding the social behaviour of *Homo sapiens*.

As I stated above, a simple yet important assumption informs the material in this volume, namely, that we are interested in and capable of better understanding ourselves, our behaviour

and character, and the behaviour and character of others. The well-known American sociologist C. Wright Mills referred to the capacity to understand our behaviour sociologically as the 'sociological imagination'. The first chapter introduces the discipline of sociology, examines how it is different from other disciplines, and explores this notion of the sociological imagination.

In Chapter 2 we begin to encounter the key elements of the sociological approach to understanding humans and their social behaviours when we learn that it is more appropriate to understand humans as cultural, as opposed to instinctual, creatures. Chapter 3 moves from the study of culture to an analysis of human society. When sociologists analyze human society, that is, resolve it into its component parts, they conclude that it can be understood to comprise institutions, roles, statuses, values, norms, groups, and so on. These concepts represent the core language of the discipline. Chapter 4 connects the individual to the social structure by examining the importance of social learning, in sociology known as 'socialization', for human development. In many ways Chapter 4 presents the core idea of the sociological perspective, specifically that our character, personality, and behaviour have been, and constantly are, radically influenced by our social environment and experiences. The last chapter in Part I presents several alternative explanations of the processes by which human personality and character develop. Chapter 5 challenges the reader to consider alternative theories of socialization and personality formation with an eye to synthesizing insights from a variety of perspectives to better account for this complex process.

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Human Behaviour

Ever since 11 September 2001, when two commercial passenger planes were deliberately flown into two of the tallest buildings in New York City, our world has been a different place. The aftermath of this unimaginable event has reintroduced a horrendous modern phrase into our everyday language—death toll. The latest figures on the 11 September 2001 death toll are just over 3,000. In the years that have followed, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have resulted in death tolls that are, of course, much higher. Why do we not recoil in horror every time an innocent life is taken, no matter how valiant the efforts are to justify the cause? Have we somehow become so desensitized that we hear and use this phrase without realizing that it refers to the abrupt end of an individual and alters the lives of someone's mother, father, daughter, son, lover, friends, and co-workers? If so, how did this happen and why? This is, of course, not the first time that terrorists have used aircrafts and innocent victims in their campaigns. But, before we decided that humanity is hopelessly depraved and capable only of violence and hatred, recall that many of the hundreds who died in New York were firefighters who routinely risk their lives for people they do not know. Why do some people wilfully plant bombs while others risk their lives to remove children from burning buildings? Indeed, ask yourself why, in any major North American city, we can see lovers in a city park holding hands, while elsewhere in the same city women are routinely admitted to hospitals after being battered by their spouses?

Staying with the theme of diverse human behaviours, consider this. Across the globe families celebrate special events by feasting on delicacies: food as diverse as raw sea urchins, sheep brains, spicy lentil soup, and partly cooked calf rump. Some of the celebrants eat with their fingers, others use long thin wooden sticks, and still others use odd-shaped silver utensils. Why, in the same city, do two youths impulsively decide to rob a convenience store, while across town two people of the same age debate what clothes they'll wear the next morning, their first day of university classes? Or try to explain this: after a wedding meal in one country, the loud burp of a guest causes considerable embarrassment for those present; in another part of the world a dinner guest's burp is ignored, or possibly understood as a compliment, an indication that the meal was thoroughly satisfying.

For students interested in understanding human behaviour, these snippets of human conduct raise important questions. What is terrorism? Why are terrorists willing to kill and injure people who have no direct connection to their particular grievances? What makes humans risk their lives for others? What is the role of romantic love in society? Why are women the most common victims of domestic violence in our society? What kinds of foods are considered tasty, and what kinds are unpalatable? What modes of conduct are appropriate during and after the consumption of food? Why do some people attend university while others do not? Why do some people commit acts defined

as criminal while others do not? What is a criminal act? Above all else, perhaps, why do human beings exhibit so many diverse kinds of behaviour?

To answer questions like these we must be both prepared and able to think systematically about human behaviour, about what is going on, and why we behave and act in certain ways. And when we begin to consider the actions and behaviour of our

selves and others, we quickly realize that we are dealing with subject matter that is incredibly complex and wide-ranging.

We find out that all aspects of human behaviour, even the seemingly most trivial and unimportant events, are part of complex social processes that occur within complicated sets of social structures, rules, and conventions. To engage in this task, to

CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIETY

In their book, *Society*, David Frisby and Derek Sayer explain the importance of understanding core concepts such as society, noting that students of sociology are confronted with quite different conceptions of what society is. They point out that three of the important so-called 'founders' each had a radically different view of society. Here is some of what they say.

Emile Durkheim

Frisby and Sayer discuss Durkheim's view of society in Chapter 2 titled 'Society as Object':

Durkheim's claim is that the 'being', society, which is formed out of the association of individuals, is a whole—an object—distinct from and greater than the sum of its parts. It forms a specific order of reality with its own distinctive characteristics. This is what is meant by saying it is *sui generis*. These characteristics of society are not reducible to nor, therefore, explicable from those of its component elements—human individuals taken in isolation. Society has emergent properties, that is, properties which do not derive from its elements considered independently of their combination, but which arise from and do not exist outwith (*sic*) that combination itself (36).

For Durkheim recognition of the *sui generis* reality of society—its distinctive ontological status—is the first, and most indispensable, condition of any scientific sociology. Society is thereby conceived as a 'system of active forces'

in its own right, a causally efficacious whole, and sociological explanation is accordingly explanation by specifically social causes.

Durkheim's second essential proposition—that social facts must be studied (*sic*) 'objectively', 'from the outside'—is for him a corollary of the first. He is demarcating himself from two major traditions in social thought here. First, he is distancing himself from aprioristic social philosophy. If, he reasons, the social world is indeed a part (albeit the highest part) of natural reality—a real object, an order of facts—then its characteristics and causes can no more be discovered by philosophical speculation than can any other laws of nature. Sociology must be 'positive', not normative; its object is a world 'out-there' which can only be discovered empirically, not deduced from philosophical first principles (37).

Durkheim's concept of society has undoubted consistency. The *sui generis* thesis, as well as

being a methodological postulate, underpins the major substantive dimensions of his concept. Society for Durkheim is primarily a moral . . . community because it is an object which is transcendent *vis-à-vis* individuals, both in space and time, and can therefore both coerce them and command their loyalty and respect. For him neither morality nor conceptual thought, both of which go beyond the individual, can originate with the individual; they both testify to and presuppose the ontological distinctiveness of society. Whatever judgement one might finally

come to on Durkheim's conception, we should note its immense fecundity. He could not, for instance, have illuminated the social conditions of suicide as he did without first refusing the reduction of the social to the individual: without, in other words, positing society as object. That fecundity, moreover, stems largely from exactly the counter-intuitive aspects of Durkheim's conception, its deliberate distance-taking from the 'common sense' perception of society as nothing but the totality of individuals and their interactions (49).

Max Weber

The notion that society is a reality out there, a social fact external to us, is radically different from the approach taken by Max Weber. Frisby and Sayer explain Weber's views of society (which are often compared with those of George Simmel, a contemporary of Weber's) in Chapter 3, 'Society as Absent Concept':

A brief examination of Max Weber's grounding of sociology, which has somewhat relatedly provided one of the most powerful traditions in modern sociology, will also confirm the tendency in sociology to abandon the concept of society as the starting point for the study of sociology. In his incomplete assessment of Simmel as a sociologist, Weber pointed to a crucial dimension of Simmel's sociology. Whereas many of those studying social life have been 'dealing with questions of "facticity," empirical questions, Simmel has turned to look at the "meaning" which we can obtain from the phenomenon (or can believe we can)'. This meaning of social interaction, for instance, had been studied by Simmel through that process by which Weber was also to operate, namely, through the construction of social types, the examination of the social scientist's typifications of participants in interaction and more generally, the interpretive understanding of actions' motivations. More significantly, however, Weber, writing over a decade after Simmel's early delineation of sociology, still

detects that he himself is reflecting upon sociology within 'a period . . . when sociologists who are to be taken very seriously maintain the thesis that the only task of sociological theory is the definition of the concept of society' (441).

Weber's own grounding of sociology decisively breaks with such a thesis. Weber systematically avoids treating all collectivities and major social aggregates, of which society is one, as *sui generis* entities. Instead, they are all introduced as labels for tendencies towards action. Although one of his major works is entitled *Economy and Society*, it does not discuss 'the definition of the concept of society' but rather societal tendencies to action or sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) which is contrasted with action motivated by a tendency towards solidarity and communality (*Vergemeinschaftung*). This becomes intelligible, as we shall see, in the light of Weber's definition of the subject-matter of sociology as the study of social action and its meaning for individual actors. The avoidance of

the concept of society is justifiable for Weber given his commitment to the methodological individualist position. Such a commitment is most clearly evident in his statement that 'If I am now a sociologist . . . I am so in order to put an end to the use of collective concepts, a use which still haunts us. In other words: even sociology can only start out from the action of one or a few, or many individuals, i.e., pursue a strictly "individualistic" method.' This is why Weber preferred to use verb forms or active nouns in order to delineate the social processes with which he was concerned. At all events, recourse to collective concepts by sociologists was only

justified on the grounds that they referred to the actual or possible social actions of individuals. And this means, in contrast to Durkheim, that 'there is no such thing as a collective personality which "acts"'. Society cannot be the starting point of Weber's sociology (67–8).

. . . Sociology is thus a discipline which 'searches for empirical regularities and types' of human action. General sociology will thus attempt to 'systematically classify' social groups—formed, through concerted social action according to the structure, content and means of social action' (69).

Karl Marx

The last major conception of society that Frisby and Sayer discuss is in the work of Karl Marx. The chapter in which we find a discussion of Marx is titled 'Society and Second Nature':

Society is not, then, a self-acting subject *sui generis*: 'its only subjects are the individuals, but individuals in mutual relationships, which they produce and reproduce anew'. But nor is society reducible to these individual subjects as such, considered independently of these relations. That would be to consider individuals abstractly and ahistorically. Society is, rather, the *set of relationships* that links individuals. Individuals—and, as we will see, objects—acquire social characteristics in virtue of their positions within these relations.

Central to this conception of society is an important point that emerges from both of the last two quotations we have given. Because is (*sic*) relational, it is integrally a system of differences, and those characteristics which mark individuals as social are therefore ones which also differentiate them as individuals in definite ways:

for instance, as master or servant, husband or wife. This means that society is not homogeneous. It is rather, in Marx's own concept, a contradictory unity. Where, as in most societies Marx analyses, the contradictions within social relations are antagonistic, society emerges as an entity to which possibilities of conflict, movement and change are inbuilt. It is thus, from the start, implicitly a dynamic whole (96).

For Marx the most basic of social relations are relations of production—those social relations established within the 'production of material life itself'—and an adequate sociology must accordingly be a materialistic one. Unlike for Simmel or Winch, there is a privileged starting-point for sociological analysis. It lies in human needs (and their historical development) (97).

Having said this, Frisby and Sayer warn against simplistic economic determinist readings of Marx in which the economic base somehow determines the character of the rest of society. After arguing that Marx himself presented views of productive relations that were complex, they go on:

Had Marxists taken this seriously, they could have generated neither a universal model of society of the base/superstructure kind nor the sort of restricted category of production relations it sustains. For on this methodology 'the connection of the social and political structure with production'—what, in any given case production relations are—could not properly be the object of a general theory, whether posited *a priori* or arrived at inductively. What is, or is not, a relation

of production could only be ascertained through empirical inquiry in each specific case. The only general concept of production relations consistent with this is precisely the one Marx offers—an empirically open-ended one. Production relations are, simply, all those social relations presupposed to a way in which people produce. What in any specific instance these relations will be in an ineluctably empirical question (101–2).

Marx's conception of society remains, nevertheless, grounded in materialist premises:

For Marx, then, people's 'materialistic connection'—their production relations—is the groundwork of society, and different types or historical epochs of society are distinguished by the particular forms this connection takes. The *mode of*

production, or 'way' in which people produce their means of subsistence, is therefore his fundamental unit of sociological analysis and historical periodization (103).

From David Frisby and Derek Sayer, *Society* (New York: Tavistock, 1986). Reprinted by permission of the authors.

explore this apparently formidable terrain of human behaviour, we clearly need to use a wide variety of intellectual tools.

The social sciences aim to provide those tools necessary for understanding behaviour and existence. We use the plural form, *social sciences*, because different social science disciplines take different approaches, or use different tools, to answer the same questions. Anthropologists, psychologists, geographers, economists, political scientists, historians, and sociologists focus on different aspects of human social existence. Given the complexities of the subject matter, this is undoubtedly both a necessary and a desirable situation. No one discipline is capable of providing all the insights required for an understanding of the many varied dimensions of human life. Indeed, each discipline is further broken down into subfields—it is next to impossible for any one person to cover any one particular field in its entirety.

Science as a Way of Knowing

Although the various social sciences approach the study of human behaviour differently, they all have at least one thing in common: they make an effort to be scientific. Used in this context, scientific refers to an approach to knowledge production that is systematic and based on specified principles and methods.

There are a number of possible responses to the simple questions, 'Why is that happening?' and 'How do you know that?' You could cite an authority as your source—a special book, a special person, or an oracle. The essence of this way of knowing is the total acceptance of the authority as an unquestioned source of knowledge. The particular authority—in which you have complete trust—defines what you know. Less common these days as a source of knowing is the experience of revelation, in which some unusual, or even mystical, occasion or phenomenon provides certain knowledge.