

KEY IDEAS IN SOCIOLOGY

THE LATTER KIVISTO

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PETER KIVISTO



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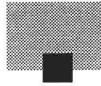
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Preface

 This book, in presenting a brief account of the sociological vocation and promise, is designed to serve as a text particularly well-suited for courses in which students are also expected to read from primary texts.

I had two specific goals in mind when setting out to write *Key Ideas in Sociology*. First, I intended for it to provide students with a general overview of the ways in which a number of important ideas have helped sociologists to better understand contemporary societies and human social relations in those societies. At the same time, I wanted to show how those ideas have been continually reformulated by social theorists attempting to respond to the ongoing impact of social change.

The second reason for writing the book is related to this last point, for it is an effort to illustrate the value of social theory beyond the classroom. I want students to come to appreciate that theories are not arcane intellectual exercises, but, in fact, are invaluable interpretive guides helping them in the ongoing quest to understand complex and ever-changing social conditions.

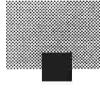
These ideas have relevance in sorting out issues related to the world of work. They speak to problems and possibilities shaping what it means to be a citizen today. They have much to offer in thinking about the shifting nature of social relations even at the most intimate levels involving lovers, friends, and neighbors. In short, the purpose of the book is to reveal the relevance of sociological thinking for everyone concerned about their public and private lives.

In preparing this work, I came to realize how important some of my former teachers were in convincing me of the vitality and significance of the sociological imagination. In coming to understand what are admittedly often difficult ideas, I had the good fortune of encountering a number of truly wonderful teachers. This began in my undergraduate years at the University of Michigan, where the kind and generous Max Heirich first planted the seeds of my decision to become a sociologist. At Yale, I took engaging courses from Norman Birnbaum and David Apter, but it was particularly in the social theory courses of a dynamic and encouraging teacher, Steve Warner, that I obtained a real grounding in sociological theory. At the New School, my main teachers Stan Lyman, Art Vidich, and the late Ben Nelson deepened and enriched my thinking, while encouraging independence of thought.

In the preparation of this manuscript, I have benefited from the assistance of a number of people. These include my mother and my sister Kathy, both of whom served as editors and critical readers. At Pine Forge, Jean Skeels has been most helpful in a wide variety of ways. Becky Smith helped immeasurably in recasting the first chapter, and in the process liberated the text from some genuinely tortured prose! Closer to home, Dan Pittman assisted with the index.

A number of people read and commented on various versions of the manuscript. Although I did not always take their advice, I greatly appreciated the collegiality and the critical insights offered by Steven Lybrand and George Ritzer.

Finally, this project would never have come to fruition without Steve Rutter. Indeed, though the final product took a rather different form from the one he originally sketched out, the initial conception of this book began with him, not me. Moreover, at every stage along the way, Steve read and responded to my drafts, thus making the final product a truly collaborative endeavor. For this, I am grateful.



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1

Key Ideas About the Social World

■ If you pay attention to recurring messages in the popular media, you might easily get the idea that our world is in the process of changing dramatically. You might sense that the past is rapidly disappearing as we cross the threshold into an entirely new era. From cheerleaders of the future, the message we get is that on one side of the divide are all the old, bankrupt ideas that have made our world so messy and dangerous, whereas on the other side are the brilliant new ideas that will usher us into utopia. From the prophets of doom, you get the opposite sense of where we have been and where we are heading. They usually have a positive, if romanticized, view of the past and its presumed values (commitment to family, community spirit, the work ethic, etc.), and they envision a future devoid of such virtues. Not surprisingly, they view what is ahead with considerable foreboding.

Both views have many popularizers. Perhaps you have seen titles like the following on bookstore shelves and at newsstands:

The End of History and the Last Man
The Age of Discontinuity
The Jobless Future
The Twilight of Common Dreams
The New World Order
The Coming Information Age
The Closing of the American Mind
Powershift
Paths to Paradise on the Liberation From Work
The Coming Global Boom
Jihad vs. McWorld

Do titles such as these make you feel curious, a little excited, or apprehensive? Realize that the authors intended to provoke such responses, in part because they help to sell books. Realize, too, that you and your contemporaries are not the first to feel this way about trends in the social world. Approximately 150 years ago, the intellectual forerunners of contemporary sociology began looking at the rapid and far-ranging changes occurring in their world and wondered why those changes were happening and where they were heading. This was the beginning of a tradition of sociological searching for answers to questions about social change.

Each succeeding generation was stimulated by the ways their predecessors attempted to understand their own particular historical situations. They borrowed ideas from those who came before them, adapting those ideas to the new circumstances that characterized their own times. In fact, the ideas expressed in the preceding titles are essentially variations and extensions of, and reactions to, not only contemporary social events but also a tradition of social thought. This book is about some of the major ideas that have developed out of that tradition. It examines their origins, their development, and their relevance at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

■ Conceptualizing Contemporary Society

In this book, we will examine four key ideas that have played a central role in discourse about the nature of society. Specifically, in the four chapters that follow we will explore the meaning and significance of the following ideas: industrial society, democracy, individualism, and modernity. These ideas can

be seen as key ideas because they help to supply us with insights into major social trends and assist us in seeing how those trends influence all facets of our lives (Elias 1978; Williams 1976; Shils 1981; Seidman 1983; Wolfe 1995).

These ideas, of course, cannot stand alone. First, they are interconnected. Thus, for example, we cannot appreciate the nature of democracy in American society today without an awareness of the nature of individualism. Some versions of individualism, which encourage the single-minded pursuit of self-interest, can work against people acting collectively in political life to advance the common good. This, obviously, has significant implications for the way democracy will look and function.

Second, these four central ideas have been further refined and shaped by a variety of other consequential ideas. In each chapter, a number of ancillary ideas that are closely related to the four master ideas, and have added new dimensions of understanding, will also be discussed. Among the concepts that will be examined are alienation, technology, capitalism, socialism, social class, citizenship, bureaucracy, and community.

With an awareness of both the interconnection of the four key concepts and the role played by a number of other important ideas, we turn to a brief preview of Chapters 2 through 5.

Industrial Society

Chapter 2 will introduce the ways in which a number of important sociological thinkers from the nineteenth century to the present have attempted to make sense of industrial society, identifying both its promise and its problems. As you will see, the Industrial Revolution signaled the advent of a new type of economic system that proved to be extraordinarily innovative, dynamic, and productive. In its relatively short history, industrial society has transformed work, the class structure, communication and transportation systems, leisure, patterns of consumption, our homes, or, in short, all facets of our lives. Most of us would not want to return to a preindustrial world because we realize that our lives are far more comfortable because of industrialization.

We also realize, however, that industrialization has a downside. Workers frequently view their employers as exploiters and their jobs as degrading and alienating. At the same time, they fear that, because of the dynamism of this type of economic system, their livelihoods are never secure. Industrial society has generated serious environmental problems and new kinds of risks. There

is a wasteful and destructive side to industrial society. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to explore the dual-edged nature of industrial society in the context of how the thinking about it has evolved during the past two centuries.

Democracy

The American and French revolutions marked the beginning of a shift in the way people thought about government and its relation to the governed. The democratic era marked the end of the age of absolutism, in which monarchs identified themselves with the state, and in which the people were seen merely as subjects of the crown. Democracy changed this by investing ultimate authority in the citizenry, with government being redefined as an institution intended to reflect and represent its interests. Throughout the nineteenth century, democracy took root and expanded in the countries of western Europe and North America—precisely those countries that were also witnessing the emergence of capitalist industrial society. By the twentieth century, democratic ideals were sufficiently powerful so that even manifestly undemocratic political regimes such as the former Soviet Union claimed to be democratic. Democracy, however, did not manage to take root in some places, and in nations where it did, it sometimes was undermined by antidemocratic forces, as in the case of Nazi Germany.

The political history of the past two centuries has prompted sociologists to attempt to ascertain the preconditions that make democracy possible as well as to discover the major threats to democratic systems. In trying to address these issues, they have also tackled a number of related questions: Are ordinary people actually fit to govern? What is their proper role in the political arena? What kinds of leaders are needed in a democracy? Can democracy survive contemporary challenges to it? Sociologists have been pondering these and related questions since the nineteenth century, and we examine the insights of some of the most prominent of these thinkers in Chapter 3.

Individualism

Chapter 4 shifts ground from large, macrolevel concerns to the social psychological realm. As the reader will learn, America was the birthplace of contemporary ideas about individualism, and because of this we tend—often unwittingly—to view the world through the lens of an individualistic worldview. Individualism in our culture is generally seen in a positive light,