

Power, Values, and Society

An Introduction to Sociology

C. Michael Otten

The cover features a complex abstract geometric design. It includes several interlocking shapes in shades of gray, black, and white, set against a vibrant red background. The design is reminiscent of a stylized staircase or a series of nested rectangular blocks, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is modern and academic.

Power, Values, and Society: An Introduction to Sociology

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To Matt, Tricy, and Patrice

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Preface

I enjoyed writing this book because it gave me an opportunity to reflect upon the themes of human survival and liberation within the framework of sociology. The book covers the major theories and findings of sociology. At the same time it examines the deeper issues of our time within the context of conflict sociology. My reading of the sociological classics suggests that this integration of issues and science is an inherent part of the discipline. Weber did not simply write about bureaucracy; he envisioned humans trapped within the "iron cage." Durkheim not only wrote about social solidarity and integration; he discussed the results in terms of human suffering.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part describes sociology as a science and discusses how science relates to values. The second part deals with "structures of material existence": politics and economics. I pay special attention to the nature and origins of the corporation, the national state, and the overall centralization of power. The final section discusses "structures of consciousness": culture, religion, and socialization. In most texts, these topics come first, but I deliberately placed these at the end in order to emphasize the theme that economic and political power, more than values, shape social institutions. Within each section, the text examines the major sociological theories and research in a nondoctrinaire manner.

Each of the three major parts is tightly integrated around four themes. First, I argue that conflict between the haves and the have nots has been the dominant principle in building and sustaining social institutions. The second theme is that society and sociology can only be understood within a historical context and that the historical context can best be understood by examining economic foundations. Third, the text emphasizes the moral foundations of sociology. I believe that social scientists are motivated by the faith that our knowledge will be a step on the road toward a better society. Fourth, the text views human history as a dialectical process between structures of consciousness (human ideals) and material structures (economics and politics). In the process of domination, those who control the means of material production also control the means of mental production. This elite domination, however, is never total; human ideals sometimes break through the power constraints.

A very important goal in writing this book was to make it readable and interesting. I believe that readability can be combined with scholarly competence, that humor is not frivolous, that intellectual depth can be applied to current issues, and that human values are compatible with scientific knowledge. Sociology, more than many disciplines, deals with the big issues of modern life. At its best, sociology combines humanistic concerns with clear theoretical thinking and rigorous data analysis. Unfortunately, most people are dangerously unaware of the subtle forces of power that allocate life's resources.

Having stated the book's themes and approach, writers traditionally acknowledge their debts. How can I acknowledge all of the former professors, generous academic colleagues, hundreds of past students, old friends, chance conversations, or elements of underlying culture that have influenced this work? Not many books are original, and that is especially true of textbooks; it is impossible to thank all the sources. However, I must mention my gratitude to Scott, Foresman, especially Walter Dinteman and associates. They provided encouragement throughout and allowed me the freedom to write the book as I saw fit. I would also like to acknowledge the highly professional editorial help of Charles Schaff. Finally, I must thank Robert Fiala, whose conversations, notes, research, and essays were extremely helpful in beginning this project.

At this point, authors traditionally thank their families for putting up with the writer's roller-coaster moods, and they recognize their spouses for editing or typing. I can't because they didn't. Yet a good life holds more important things than writing books, and in those other areas my family excelled. Writing this book would have been far gloomier without their Halloween pumpkins, their summer insects, their multitudes of cats and mice, or their penetrating conversations.

C.M.O

To the Student

I wrote this book with an image of students constantly in mind, and that image encouraged me to be straightforward and clear. My image included a bored student or two, sitting in the back row, who put a burden upon me to make things more interesting.

Sociology can be a fascinating subject because it is ultimately the story of our own lives and the forces that shape us. The basic thread of this book is that society—the institutions of politics, economics, family, religion, education, and so forth—has been strongly shaped by social inequality. For the last eight or nine thousand years there have been the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the respected and the humiliated. There are greater and lesser degrees of inequality, but, contrary to myths, no nation—not the United States or China or Norway or any other—is without inequality. Over the centuries, the elite have shaped the society to fit their interests—though not without opposition.

This book challenges many commonly held assumptions about our society, but I believe there is evidence to support this perspective. Like everyone else's, my knowledge is shaped by social illusions, personal values, and hidden biases. Unlike many text authors, however, I try to be candid about these background assumptions.

C.M.O.

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Power, Values, and Society: An Introduction to Sociology

As you eat breakfast you look out the window as you're going past and there's the Mediterranean area, and Greece and Rome and North Africa, and the Sinai, the whole area. . . . That whole process begins to shift of what it is you identify with. . . . From where you see it, the thing is a whole, and it's so beautiful. [The Earth] becomes so small and so fragile, and such a precious little spot in that universe, that you can block it out with your thumb, and you realize that on that small spot, that little blue and white thing is everything that means anything to you. . . . And when you come back, there's a difference in that world now.

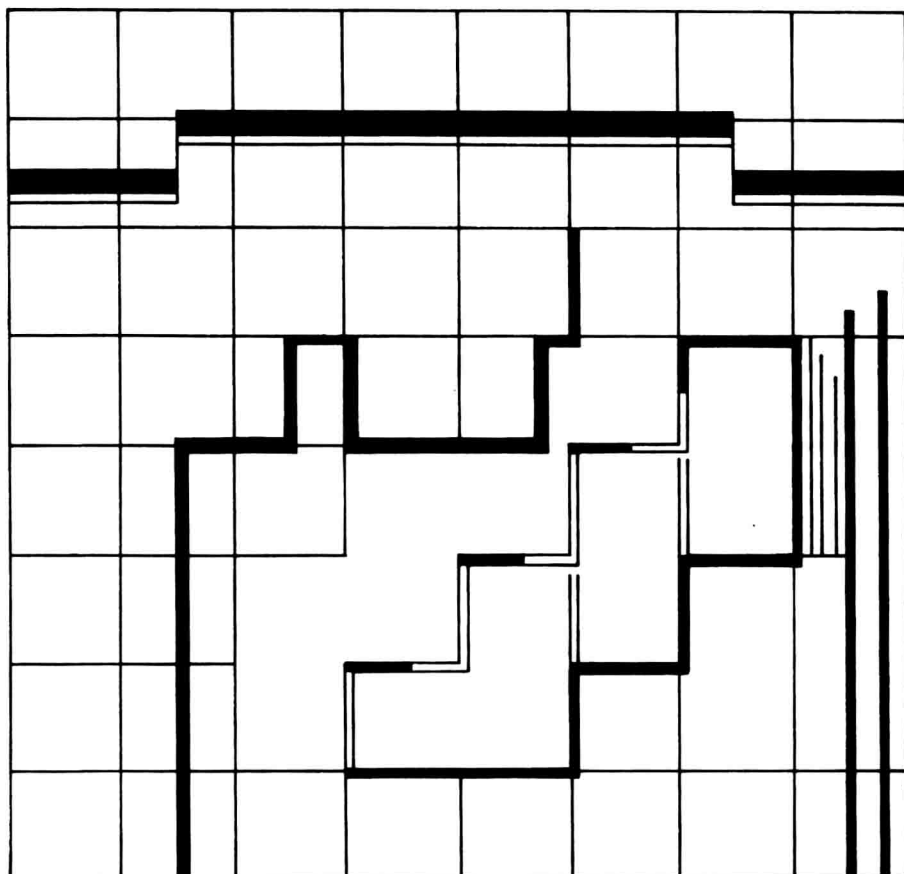
——**Russell Schweickart** **Astronaut on Apollo 9.**

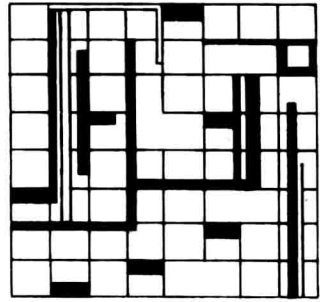
The effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others is the great durable curse of the race. . . . It has so happened, in all ages of the world, that some have labored, and others without labor, enjoyed a large proportion of the fruits. This is wrong, and should not continue.

——**Abraham Lincoln**

1

Science, Technology, and the Human Condition





1 Society and Social Concerns

Book Themes

Personal Commitments and Scientific Truths: Scientists as People

Raising the Issues

Presenting the Evidence

The Nature of Science

Sociology as a Science

Experimentation

Survey Research

Historical and Comparative Research

Case Studies

Participant Observation and Field Studies

Book Themes

An astronaut suggests what might be, and Lincoln reflects upon what has been. We live in a time of beginnings, but we remain fixed to the social institutions of the past. Whether we like it or not, all our fates are linked together on this planet “so small and so fragile.”

Despite our common fate, we persist with the “great durable curse”: some labor little and receive much, while others labor much and receive little. Even worse, the elite have the resources to make their privileges seem justified. Prestige usually comes with wealth and power, and shame frequently follows poverty and powerlessness.

We need only walk by the artful displays in fashionable shopping districts and the boarded-up windows of the slums, or observe the new black Mercedes passing the rusted old station wagon, in order to sense the self-righteousness and shame of inequality. Reflect upon the inequality and unfairness in your classroom, where some are supported by their parents while others probably work thirty or forty hours a week; yet all must compete for grades as though everyone has equal opportunity for study.

The major theme of this book is that conflict between the haves and the have-nots, between the dominant and the subordinate groups, is the major organizing force in society. Conflict is not the only approach for studying society, but it is one of the major sociological traditions. The many subtle elements that bind people into a society will not be ignored, but social consensus is not the organizing principle.

Nor does this book attempt to perform the unmanageable job of including “everything that is important.” Given the enormous range of sociological information, it is impossible to write a single text presenting all the theories, findings, intellectual figures, and major studies. Attempts to cover the entire field usually result in a jumbled smorgasborg of undigestible information. I want to provide a spicier meal, with each item more or less complementing the others. Some may like the bill of fare and some may not, but at least it will have a flavor and texture that can be remembered and argued over.

Let me put this another way. All books, including texts, have a point of view, whether the author admits it or not. Authors are people, and people have values that define for them what is important and what is not. A criterion for selecting material is necessary because only a small proportion of the available information can be contained within the covers of a book.

Too often, authors disguise their views behind a screen of scientific objectivity, or frequently they remain ignorant of their own assumptions. Yet authors cannot be removed from their works. Our inner selves, and especially our values, determine what we consider worth presenting. More subtly, we choose one example rather than another, and we put some things first while putting others last. Even the unconscious use of words and metaphors, the tone of language, the vagueness or forcefulness of sentence structure reveal the buried foundations of our thoughts. By stating the case being made, we can be more, not less, objective, because our position itself becomes an object of consideration. Therefore it is worth bringing to light those very commitments which textbook authors normally bury under mounds of facts, references, jargon, and message-laden pictures.

Stated in the simplest terms, the organizing idea of this book can be summarized with two words—*increased power*. The unique feature of our time is increased power over persons and over nature. I argue that for the greatest span of human existence, the hunting and gathering phase, society was simple and persons were essentially equal. Put another way, it was an intensely communal life where everyone had equal access to the necessities of life. However, about eight thousand years ago, people settled down and began to grow and manage their own food supply, accumulate property, and rule one another. Humanity left the small band of nomadic equals and entered the stage called civilization. Since then the inequality of people has been the major, but not the only, organizing force in human society.

In our modern world, power over nature and people is concentrated in the gigantic corporation and in the national state. Economics and politics, what I have labeled the “structures of material existence,” dominate our society and deeply penetrate our daily lives. Economics and politics, which are controlled by a few, form the major contours within which we live, work, love, and die. The “structures of consciousness,” made up of self-images, ambitions, likes, dislikes, and even “reality,” are also part of the dominating process. The structures of consciousness compose our inner worlds, yet these structures often reflect the interests of the powerful classes. For example, in modern America about two-thirds of the citizens get all of their news from television, which, in turn, is dominated by corporate advertising.

Fortunately, there are contradictions to the major theme of dominance. Sometimes cultural ideals and personal quests break through the powers of dominance and even the symbolic structures of control. We are not totally chained to the moving gears of the social machinery.