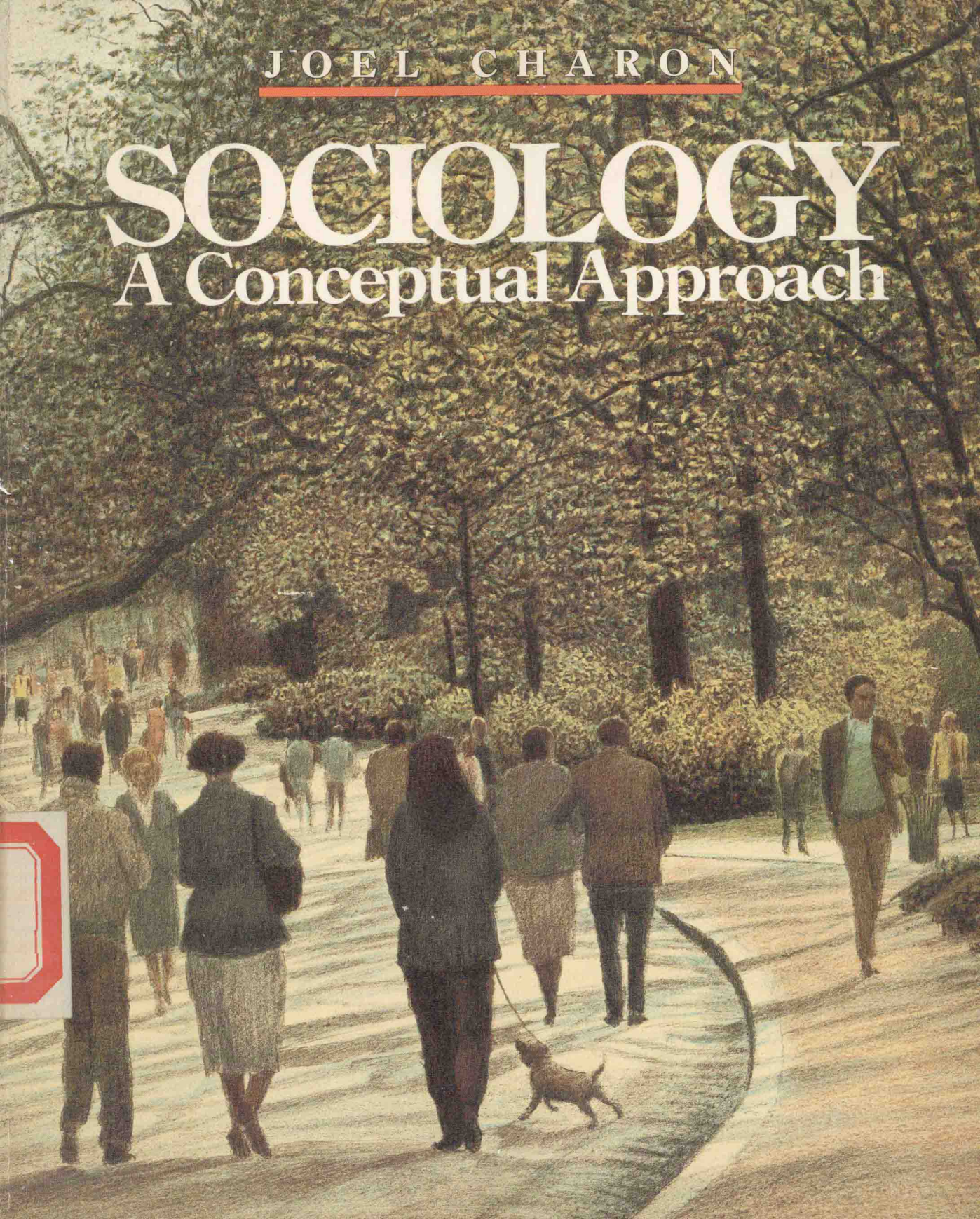


JOEL CHARON

SOCIOLOGY

A Conceptual Approach



Sociology

A Conceptual Approach

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To Susan Cohen Charon and William M. Jones. Thank you.

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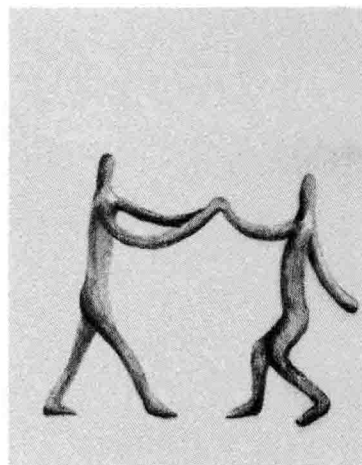
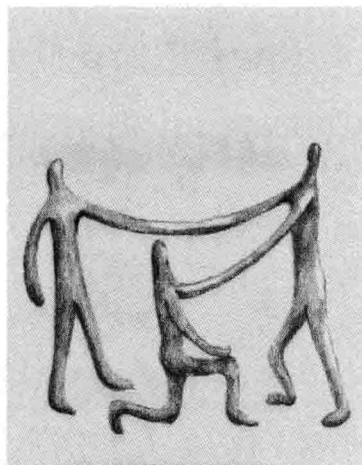
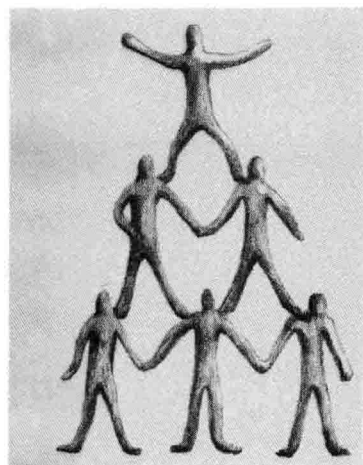
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Sociology

A Conceptual Approach



Preface

The underlying principle of this book is that sociology is a perspective that addresses the big questions. Sociology is interesting and important because its questions are those that all thinking people ask: What is the essence of the human being? What causes human action? What is society? Why is there social order? Social change? Social inequality? Social conflict? The research studies, theories, and examples in this book are meant to appeal to those instructors who see sociology as a way of thinking about the human condition.

KEY QUESTIONS, THEMES, AND CONCEPTS

Three themes are used throughout the book. First, *human beings are social in almost every way*. To ignore our social being is to ignore the central part of what we are. Second, *human beings are subject to a number of social forces*. We may be free to make choices, but social forces can limit that freedom, and these forces must be considered if any claim to freedom is made. Third, *sociology is an exciting perspective*. Its ideas are unique, useful, and necessary for a good understanding of the human being.

There is an attempt here to present complex ideas so they can be understood in an interesting manner. Examples were chosen for their interest and relevance to the concept and were taken from everyday situations, historical or societal events, empirical studies, and key ideas of social thinkers like Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and George Herbert Mead. The material is intended to challenge the reader, not in the number of facts to know and remember, but in the nature of the questions asked and the issues investigated.

A CONCEPTUAL ORGANIZATION

Something new is being tried here in terms of organization: chapters are centered around core concepts. Instructors will notice that, except for the family system, the book does not have separate chapters on social institutions. While description of institutions is not the central focus of the book, they are covered in various conceptual chapters—social power, social class, or social order, for example. Topics such as gender inequality, population, and urbanization, are not covered in separate chapters; they are introduced where they are relevant to the chapter concepts. Gender inequality, for example, is a major topic in four different chapters: Socialization and Our Social Nature (chapter 3), Social Structure (chapter 7), Minorities and Social Structure (chapter 14), and The Family in a Changing Society (chapter 17). Boxes, readings,

graphs, charts, and other extras, traditional in most texts, have been kept at a minimum since the chapters are written to flow from beginning to end.

A TEACHING FRAMEWORK

Instructors will find this book a refreshing guide to teaching; no matter what their orientation, they can find a solid teaching framework in it. Each chapter presents an array of concepts, ideas, important social thinkers, and studies that are designed to encourage students to ask questions and instructors to organize their presentations of the sociological perspective in a logical manner. The chapter opening display of these conceptual elements will help students organize their approach to the material and their review of it for tests and quizzes. The entire presentation allows ample room for further explanation, disagreement, and amplification using the instructor's favorite theorists and empirical studies.

A BALANCED PERSPECTIVE

This book is not easily labeled in terms of its general point of view. The author would like to claim that it is eclectic. Its purpose is to present the entire *perspective of sociology*, not just one school of thinking. The book is balanced, not because it artificially introduces three or four schools in every chapter, but because it presents individuals and schools wherever they seem to make an important contribution to understanding. It moves freely from micro to macro sociology, always attempting to show how sociology is applicable to all social life.

This book has taken six years to write. The author's inspiration has always been to write an interesting and accurate introduction to sociology, a perspective that makes a great contribution toward understanding the human condition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who made this book possible, and I am very grateful to them. A number of manuscript reviewers, for both Mayfield Publishing Company and Allyn and Bacon, have proved helpful to my efforts in improving upon the strengths and overcoming the problems in the manuscript. While any remaining shortcomings are my own, I am grateful for the helpful suggestions of Professors:

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- Leland McCormick (Mankato State University)

For six years students and faculty have made contributions. Especially important were the contributions of Felice Fergel, Laurel Graham, Jennifer Legg, Jan Eliot, Pearl Kopita, Arne Garness, Jerry Fuchs, Mike Hughey, Dave Olday, Swaran Sandhu, Mark Hansel, and Joan Murdoch.

Barry Cohen's detailed analysis of these chapters was invaluable, and John Sherman's suggestions helped make this book much more understandable. John Lea, who shared both office and conversation during my sabbatical, always brought me back to the kind of sociology that I wished to capture.

I am also grateful to the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for the use of its facilities during my sabbatical leave. Throughout the six years of writing the book I have also been very fortunate to obtain the necessary support from Moorhead State University, a university that I think is deserving of great respect.

The psychological support that I received from colleagues and friends was especially important to me. Ron Kopita, Milton Legg, David Myers, Nancy Parlin, and Lok Chua believed in this project, and I am very thankful for that. Individuals in the publishing world also stand out for the support they gave me—especially Steve Manis (Alfred Publishing Co.), Frank Graham (Mayfield Publishing Co.) and Al Levitt, Judy Shaw, and Allen Workman (Allyn and Bacon).

My sons—Andrew and Daniel—supported me throughout this project and helped me whenever I needed it. I will always be indebted to them.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to two people who gave me the confidence necessary to complete it: Susan Charon, my wife, and William Jones, past academic vice president of Moorhead State University.

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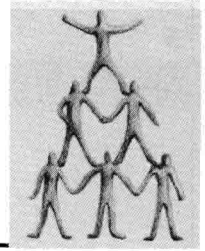
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CORE IDEAS

- Sociology is an academic discipline, a perspective, and a social science.
- Sociology focuses on the human being as a social animal.
- Sociology developed in the nineteenth century. It was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution.
- Key founders of sociology include Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim.

KEY WORDS

sociology

academic discipline
social science

perspective

Enlightenment
French Revolution

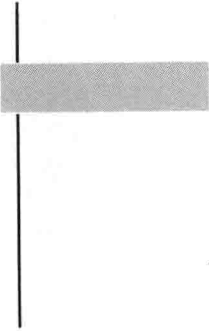
conservative (tradition)

liberal/radical (tradition)
Industrial Revolution

SOCIAL THINKERS

C. Wright Mills
Peter Berger
Auguste Comte

Karl Marx
Max Weber
Emile Durkheim



Human beings are difficult to understand. Our behavior is often contradictory, and often we expect from others exactly the opposite from what they actually do. We say we believe in democracy, yet inequality of opportunity does not seem to bother us. Many of us enter marriage with high hopes yet end up totally disillusioned. And after breaking up once, we try marriage again—and again. We know that everyone will be hurt by nuclear war, but nations come so close to it, not just once but several times. The “most likely to succeed” in the senior class ends up surprising everyone by refusing “success.” Jonathan, the class atheist, ends up finding religion. Humans make it to the moon and conquer disease, 900 commit mass suicide in the name of a religious commitment at Jonestown, Guyana, and wealthy nations give aid to struggling nations and rob them simultaneously.

The question remains: Why are people so difficult to understand and to predict? Better questions are: Why do people do what they do? How can we explain human behavior? Some of us are satisfied with easy answers: “That just goes to show you—people are just plain dumb.” “People are selfish.” “There are two kinds of people: crazy ones and normal ones (like us).” Many are satisfied with chalking up the contradictions to “human nature.” Others call their explanation simply “common sense.” It is tempting to look for easy explanations where there may be none, to be lazy in figuring out the world, to look for one or two clues that explain everything. For events that disgust us, we blame an individual or a conspiratorial group. Gordon Allport, a social psychologist, pointed out in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954: 170) that for many people “it is the devil who brings evil and disorder,” or “it is the President of the country who brings on the depression.” Cause is personalized because it is easy to grasp. That is why, Allport continued, demagogues like Hitler are successful: they blame complex events such as wars and revolutions on a single factor, such as the Jewish people or communists.

Human nature and conspiracies are the time-worn easiest explanations of human action, and even among educated people, the temptation is to use these when understanding is difficult. To personalize cause may be satisfying but usually far from accurate, and to call something human nature is usually fleeing from tackling understanding.

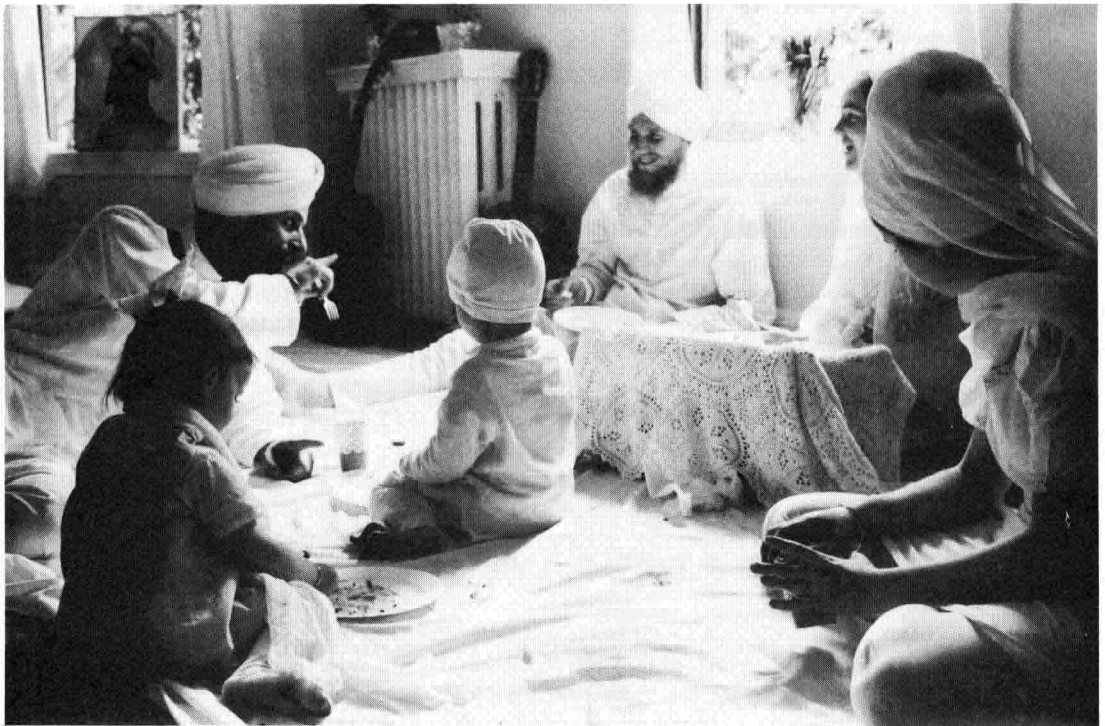
There have always been some people who have seen the tremendous complexities involved in understanding why people do what they do. The brilliance of Socrates stemmed from the fact that he took people’s truths and showed that they were too simple and were accepted without careful thought. Socrates, like many other people who refuse to accept the easy answers, threatened people with his questions. It is often hard for people to face the fact that events have many causes, that actors must be understood within the context of many complex and often contradictory forces, that human nature is never fixed and rarely a satisfactory answer, and that blame is difficult, often impossible, to establish.

MEANING OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology: A Social Explanation

Sociology is a perspective that tries to give a sophisticated and factual explanation of why people act as they do. Over about 150 years, sociologists have come to share a set of concepts and ideas that make up a general explanation of why things happen. There is disagreement of course, but, overall, there is a recognition that humans are social beings, capable of a wide diversity of action because of the people around them, because of what they learn from others, and because of the social patterns they find themselves in. This perspective is different from one that sees humans as determined by biology or by God, since if we accept the idea that humans are heavily influenced by social life, almost everything becomes possible: murder or love, pursuing money or freedom, finding meaning in being a housewife or in being a corporate executive, cooperating to build a humane society or cooperating to exterminate a group of people.

Human beings are born in society. To a great extent society determines what we become, do, and think. Sociologists try to trace the individual back to this powerful influence. In a basic sense sociologists believe that the individual is in the center of a



Sociologists believe that the individual is in the center of a host of social forces that order his or her life.

host of social forces that order his or her life. Society gives meaning to lives, provides ready-made actions to imitate, and offers the truths, values, and wants that we claim as our own. And deception is involved, for normally we accept these without serious question and almost never realize the true strength of other people on our lives. One early sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), gave social forces the name *social facts*. He showed that these forces, invisible and anchored in a long history, help to determine the decisions made by the individual. Karl Marx (1818–1883), another important early thinker in the sociological tradition, showed how many of the key truths we all take for granted in society are actually manufactured by the powerful in society and that these truths serve to support powerful groups. We only imagine that our truths are our own, according to Marx. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) tied society to the self and persuasively showed how self-control is really nothing more or less than social control. Society or other people, he said, become the basis for the controls we exercise over self. These three thinkers are not isolated examples. Many more could be listed, each illustrating a slightly different variation of the common theme linking sociology: *what we are, what we think, and what we do is tied to the society within which we are embedded*.

To summarize, then, sociology is an *explanation of human action*, an explanation that focuses on *social life*, and, as a result, an explanation that sees humans as being enormously *flexible* in what they are capable of doing.

Sociology: A Social Science Discipline

Sociology is an academic discipline. The word *discipline* is important, for it implies an order, a *systematic study of a topic*. A discipline has a history, a group of scholars who together investigate a portion of reality and are viewed by themselves and others as a branch of knowledge. Sociology is similar in this sense to art, history, psychology, physics, and mathematics. All disciplines have rules that scholars must follow to prove their ideas and to check each other's work.

Sociology is one of the academic disciplines called *social science*. The focus of social science is the human being; its method of investigation is scientific. Other social sciences are anthropology, economics, and political science. Most of the time psychology, and sometimes history and geography, are also considered social sciences.

Each social science has a focus, a defined territory, that it concentrates on. The economist examines the human economic system and how it works in society. The political scientist looks at the political system or government. Psychologists examine how the individual develops; they look at the subtle ways in which the environment and heredity interact to form the organism, or personality. Historians examine society's past. Anthropologists examine human culture and human evolution. Sociologists focus on interaction, human social life, and the nature and influence of society.

Sociology as a social science is different from other academic disciplines such as the humanities, art, philosophy, and, some would add, history in that it is a science. In no way does this mean that sociology is better, only that it shares with physics, anthropology, political science, and all the other natural and social sciences a certain approach to examining the world. It relies on a certain kind of evidence. Evidence must be open to other people's senses; only when the facts can be observed are they