

Contemporary SOCIOLOGY

■ CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES



■ PETER S. LI

■ B. SINGH BOLARIA

Contemporary **SOCIOLOGY**

■ **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Edited by

Peter S. Li and B. Singh Bolaria

University of Saskatchewan

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To Mimi and Terence

Peter S. Li

To Rosemary, Roxana, and Kiran

B. Singh Bolaria

PREFACE

By the time we started working on this book, we had, between the two of us, accumulated almost forty years of experience teaching sociology and writing about contemporary society. Throughout our careers, we have written many articles and books aimed at the academic community. Until we began this project, however, we had not taken up the challenge of developing a book for first-year university students of sociology. Our decision to do so was based on several reasons.

First, we had grown somewhat disenchanted with many existing textbooks in sociology that are reluctant to be critical of the society they seek to explain. We understand this conservative approach, especially given the widely held view that debate in sociology is for senior students and that first-year students should approach understanding society through well-grounded sociological traditions. We believe, however, that in their quest for knowledge, first-year students are much more capable of handling uncertainty than their teachers consider them to be. We have found that when confronted with controversy students are intellectually stimulated, and that when presented with knowledge that cannot be questioned, their interest is stifled. For this reason, we want to honour the rights of first-year students to study sociology from a critical standpoint. We consider sociology to be a vigorous discipline in that it is critical—that is its *raison d'être*. C. Wright Mills challenged the sociology of the fifties as being dull and unimaginative, and we often wonder whether his criticism is just as relevant today as it was then.

Second, notwithstanding the spectacular progress sociology as a discipline has made in the past few decades, a gap remains between what is debated in sociological journals and what makes its way into introductory textbooks. Many authors avoid current trends in first-year textbooks, for fear that such material may challenge existing traditions and contaminate the innocent minds of students. A case in point involves the political economy perspective in sociology, which has gained wide acceptance in sociological journals as a legitimate and often times preferred approach in understanding society. Yet many textbooks treat it as a form of radicalism that predisposes students in one theoretical direction, whereas exposure to other perspectives is seen as having a neutral or objective influence on them. This bias is evident in sociological textbooks that label political economy as the "conflict approach," but accept "non-

political economy perspectives" as *bona fide* sociology. Despite its emergent importance in recent years, the political economy perspective is thus often introduced to students through tinted spectacles.

Third, the intellectual bias against the political economy perspective has resulted in many textbooks avoiding a vigorous discussion of the capitalist economy and the state—a serious omission because of their central relevance in understanding contemporary society. A careful reading of the works of classical writers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber leads one to realize the primacy of capitalism in their theories, albeit with different emphases. Yet the omission of capitalism as a topic of discussion in introductory texts has unfortunately become a rule rather than an exception. This book attempts to correct the imbalance.

Fourth, many editors of introductory textbooks choose to focus on the general principles of society at the expense of contemporary issues. We have tried to present a balance here by including both general sociological principles and specific social issues that are critical to understanding contemporary society. Our attempt to provide a comprehensive profile of contemporary society has prompted us to include more chapters in this book than are normally found in a standard sociology text. For example, we have devoted five chapters to the capitalist economy and the state; we have also included chapters on applied sociology, ecology, Quebec, native peoples, and rural sociology. We hope these chapters will add refreshing viewpoints for understanding contemporary society.

The number of chapters and the diversity of authors compelled us, as editors, to introduce some uniformity throughout the book. But we have intentionally avoided making each chapter look like a recipe in a cookbook. We provided key questions to contributors for the purpose of standardizing the components of each chapter, but we left to the discretion of each contributor how to tackle these questions. As it stands, readers can expect to find in each chapter a discussion of the major research questions in the specific field of study, the theoretical explanations provided by traditional sociologists, the interpretation of critical sociologists, and relevant empirical findings. Some contributors followed our guidelines more rigorously than others, but this variety adds to the richness of the book. As well, each chapter includes tables and figures to provide needed statistics and facts. Excerpts from other works, study questions, a glossary of terms, and annotated suggested readings are

intended to help students comprehend the material and do further research. There are twenty-eight chapters in order to help instructors plan a course that runs roughly from twenty-six to twenty-eight weeks.

There are other reasons why we think a new sociology text is needed. Suffice it to say, we were pleasantly surprised by publishers' reactions and by the contributors' enthusiasm to what we thought was a minority voice. We are grateful to the thirty outstanding scholars and colleagues across Canada who have contributed to this book. Their generosity and graciousness encouraged us to go ahead with it; their efforts and dedication finally brought this book to fruition. We sincerely thank them for their confidence in us and the support they have given us.

Brian Henderson, then executive editor of Copp Clark Pitman, was most encouraging to our initial ideas, and offered to publish our book before others

were also eager to do so. We appreciate his foresight, and we thank him for his advice and support in developing this project. It was Brian's successor, Jeff Miller, who in his capacity as executive editor brought this book into production. Pamela Erlichman edited the manuscript. She and others at Copp Clark Pitman are pleasant to work with, and we thank them for a most professional and enjoyable working relationship. Trina Vicq has assisted us in organizing the materials for the book. She has also developed the test bank accompanying the text. We enjoyed working with her and we sincerely thank her for her invaluable contribution.

Our families have become used to our erratic presence while we work on writing projects. Their tolerance and patience with us are well appreciated.

Peter S. Li and B. Singh Bolaria

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