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JAMES M. HENSLIN

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# DOWN TO EARTH SOCIOLOGY

INTRODUCTORY READINGS  
THIRD EDITION



# Down to Earth Sociology

*Introductory Readings*

THIRD EDITION

James M. Henslin, Editor



THE FREE PRESS

*A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.*

NEW YORK

*For my children—*  
Stephanie, James, Greta, and Paul

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THE FREE PRESS  
*A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.*  
866 Third Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10022

Collier Macmillan Canada, Ltd.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 80-2315

Printed in the United States of America

printing number

3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Henslin, James M comp.  
Down to earth sociology.

Bibliography: p.  
Includes index.

1. Sociology—Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. United States—Social conditions—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Title.

HM51.H3976 1981 301 80-2315

ISBN 0-02-914660-7

# Preface to the Third Edition

It is with pleasure that I introduce the third edition of *Down to Earth Sociology*, a pleasure akin to seeing a dear friend reach another welcome milestone in his or her life. Adopters of earlier editions will find what I hope are refreshing changes in both the content and the organization of the book.

Following the suggestions of those who have used the first two editions of *Down to Earth Sociology* in the classroom, I have strived to find articles even more down to earth in order to make the student's introduction to sociology enjoyable and meaningful. More than ever, these articles reflect the experiences of people who have "been there," and who, with a minimum of jargon and quantification, insightfully share those experiences with the reader.

Focusing on social interaction in ordinary or everyday activities and situations, these selections share some of the fascination of sociology. They reflect both the individualistic and the structural emphases of our discipline. Social structure is not simply an abstract fact of life; it vitally affects our lives. The decisions of the rich, the politicians, and the bureaucrats provide social constraints that augment those dictated by birth, social class, and other circumstances. By social structure our vision of life is lifted or limited, our chances of success closed or opened. Social structure concretely brings tears and laughter, hopes and despair.

Yet so much of sociology goes about its business as though data were unconnected to people, as though the world consisted of analysis of abstract social facts. From my own experiences I know this is far from the truth—divorced from life—and I have sought authors who share the realities that people directly experience. At least as I see it, sociology is the most fascinating of the social sciences, and it is this fascination that these selections are designed to convey.

It is my hope that I have succeeded in accomplishing this goal, because I believe that sociology is able to open new windows of perception that can touch every aspect of the individual's world. If these readings achieve at least part of this goal, I owe a great debt to the many who adopted the earlier editions, especially to those whose reactions and suggestions have helped give shape to the contents of *Down to Earth Sociology*.

In response to those suggestions, I have reorganized the selections to make them more compatible with most introductory textbooks.

Through subjects inherently interesting, we cover the major substantive areas of sociology. Part I is an introduction to the sociological perspective; it invites students to view the world in a new way by participating in the exciting enterprise we call sociology. Part II examines the cultural underpinnings of social life, the taken-for-granted assumptions and contexts that provide the contours of our everyday life in society. In Part III, that essential part of our beings—sexuality—is the focus, including an analysis of both the processes by which we assume the social identity of male or female and how those identities provide the basis for interaction among adults.

Part IV examines social groups and social structure, looking behind the scenes to see how people's assumptions, the features of social settings, individuals' previous relationships with one another, and the structuring of work relationships establish both constraints and freedoms. The process of becoming deviant, the broader social context that shapes deviance and social reactions to violations of social control are the subjects of Part V. We examine social stratification in Part VI, looking at the income, educational, sexual, occupational, and racial dimensions of social inequality. In Part VII the social institutions of the family, education, religion, medicine, law, and our intertwining political, military, and economic interests are analyzed. Social change is the focus of Part VIII; after introducing the concept of future shock, the realities of urban renewal and the search for personal roots in a rapidly changing social world are then discussed.

These selections bring the student face to face with the dual emphases of contemporary sociological research: the focus on the individual's experience and the analysis of social structure. Uncovering the basic expectations that underlie routine social interactions, these articles emphasize the ways in which social institutions are interrelated. It is to these authors' credit that we lose sight of neither the people who are interacting nor the structural base that so directly influences the form and content of their interactions.

# About the Contributors

**Peter L. Berger** (article 1) received his Ph.D. at the New School for Social Research. He is a Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University and the author of numerous books, including *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, *The Sacred Canopy*, *A Rumor of Angels*, and *Invitation to Sociology*, from which the selection in this book is taken.

**William J. Chambliss** (article 17) earned his Ph.D. from Indiana University. He is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Delaware and has written several books, including *Crime and the Legal Process*, *Criminal Law in Action*, *On the Take*, and *Whose Law? What Order?*

**Jonathan Cobb** (article 23) earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University and is involved in working-class studies at the Center for the Study of Public Policy in Cambridge, Mass. He has edited (with Stephan Thernstrom) *Nineteenth Century Cities* and (with Richard Sennett) has written *Hidden Injuries of Class*, from which the selection in Part VI is taken.

**Nanette J. Davis** (article 16) earned her Ph.D. from Michigan State University and is an Associate Professor at Central Michigan University. She is the author of *Sociological Constructions of Deviance*.

**Sanford M. Dornbusch** (article 29) was awarded his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago and is a Professor of Sociology at Stanford University. He has written *Evaluation and the Exercise of Authority* (with W. Richard Scott) and *Popular Religion* (with Louis Schneider).

**Matthew P. Dumont** (article 12) is a psychiatrist with the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health in Boston. He is the author of *The Absurd Healer: Perspectives of a Community Psychiatrist*.

**Herbert J. Gans** (article 35) received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. He is a Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and has written such books as *The Levittowners*, *Deciding What's News*, and *The Urban Villagers*, from which his article is taken.

**Barney G. Glaser** (article 31) earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University and is a Professor of Sociology at the University of California at San Francisco. Glaser and Anselm M. Strauss have co-authored a number of books, including *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, *Awareness of Dying*, and *Time for Dying*, from which the selection in this book is taken.

**Erving Goffman** (article 6) earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and is now the Director of the Center for Urban Ethnography

at the University of Pennsylvania. His many books include *Stigma, Behavior in Public Places, Frame Analysis*, and the book from which a selection in Part II is taken, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

**Ray Gold** (article 25) earned his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago and is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Montana.

**David Gordon** (article 30) received his Ph.D. at the University of Colorado and is a Research Associate of Sociology at the Cornell University Medical Center.

**Edward T. Hall** (article 5) was awarded his Ph.D. at Columbia University. He is a Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University, has written several books, including *The Silent Language, The Hidden Dimension*, and *Beyond Culture*; and co-authored the selection in Part II with Mildred R. Hall.

**Mildred R. Hall** (article 5) received her B.A. from Barnard College and is the author of *The Fourth Dimension in Architecture* (with Edward T. Hall) and the co-author (with Edward T. Hall) of the fifth article in this book.

**James M. Henslin** (articles 7 and 11) earned his Ph.D. from Washington University in St. Louis. He is a Professor of Sociology at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, the author of *Introducing Sociology: Toward Understanding Life in Society*, and the editor of several books, including *Marriage and Family in a Changing Society* and *The Sociology of Sex* (with Edward Sagarin).

**Joan Huber** (article 24) earned her Ph.D. at Michigan State University and is presently a Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois. She is the author of *Income and Ideology* (with William H. Form) and the editor of *Changing Women in a Changing Society*.

**Everett C. Hughes** (article 27) received his Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Chicago. He is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Boston College and is the author of such books as *French Canada in Transition, Collective Behavior*, and (with others) the editor of *The Collected Papers of Robert Park*.

**Robert Lejeune** (article 18) received his Ph.D. from Columbia University. He is an Assistant Professor at Herbert H. Lehman College.

**Elliot Liebow** (article 26) earned his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the Catholic University of America. He is a social anthropologist with the National Institute of Mental Health and the author of *Tally's Corner*, the book from which his article is taken.

**Ralph Linton** (article 3) earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University, and at the time of his death in 1953 was a Professor of Anthropology at Yale University. His many books include *The Material Culture of the Marquesas Islands, The Cultural Background of Personality*, and *The Study of Man*.

**David Matza** (article 19) was awarded his Ph.D. at Princeton University and is a Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. He is the author of *Delinquency and Drift* and *Becoming Deviant* and co-author, with Gresham M. Sykes, of the article in this book.

**C. Wright Mills** (articles 2 and 33) received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. His scathing criticisms of American society in such books as *White Collar*, *The Power Elite*, *The Causes of World War III*, as well as the book from which article 2 is taken, *The Sociological Imagination*, made him one of the most controversial sociologists in the United States. At the time of his death in 1962, he was a Professor of Sociology at Columbia University.

**Horace Miner** (article 4) earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan.

**Annabella B. Motz** (article 28) earned her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago and is a Professor of Sociology at American University.

**Lee Rainwater** (article 22) was awarded his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. He is a Professor of Sociology at Harvard University and is the author of such books as *And the Poor Get Children*, *Behind Ghetto Walls*, *Family Design*, and (with Richard Coleman) *Social Standing in America*.

**Howard Robboy** (article 14) was awarded his Ph.D. at Rutgers University, where he is now a member of the Sociology Department. He is the editor (with Sidney L. Greenblatt and Candace Clark) of *Social Interaction: Introductory Readings in Sociology*.

**Mimi Rodin** (article 10) received her Ph.D. at the University of Illinois and is an Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois School of Public Health.

**Richard Rodriguez** (article 36) is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of California, Berkeley.

**David L. Rosenhan** (article 21) received his Ph.D. in Psychology from Columbia University and has edited (with P. London) *Foundation of Abnormal Psychology*, and *Theory and Research in Abnormal Psychology*, as well as *Social Psychology* (with K. Gergen, R. Nisbett, and G. Clapp). He is a Professor of Psychology and Law at Stanford University.

**Richard Sennett** (article 23) earned his Ph.D. at Harvard University. He is Professor of Sociology at New York University and the author of such books as *The Fall of a Public Man*, *Families Against the City*, *The Use of Disorder*, and is co-author, with Jonathan Cobb, of their article in Part VI.

**Alix Kates Shulman** (article 8) is a freelance writer who lives in New York City. She is the author of *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*.



**Leonard I. Stein** (article 9) earned his M.D. from the Medical School of the University of Wisconsin, where he is currently a Professor.

**Anselm M. Strauss** (article 31) received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and is a Professor at the University of California at San Francisco. (See Glaser, above, for books co-authored.)

**Gresham M. Sykes** (article 19) was awarded his Ph.D. at Northwestern University. He is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia. His books include *Crime and Society* and *Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*; his article was co-authored by David Matza.

**Alvin Toffler** (article 34) is the author of several books, among them *The Culture of Consumers*, *The Third Wave*, and *Future Shock*, from which his article is taken.

**William A. Westley** (article 32) earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He is a Professor of Sociology at McGill University and has written *The Merging Worker* (with Margaret W. Westley), *The Silent Majority* (with Nathan B. Epstein), and *Violence and the Police*.

**William Foote Whyte** (articles 13 and 15) received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He is a Professor in the Department of Sociology at Cornell University and has written several books, including *Men at Work*, *Industry and Society*, *Organizing for Agricultural Development*, and *Street Corner Society*, the book from which article 13 is taken.

**Philip G. Zimbardo** (article 20) earned his Ph.D. from Syracuse University and is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at Stanford University. His books include *Psychology and Life*, *The Shyness Workbook*, and *Influencing Attitudes and Changing Behavior*.

# Acknowledgments

## Article number

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# Part I: The Sociological Perspective

I would like to begin this first introduction on a personal note. Since my early school days, I enjoyed reading immensely. I read almost anything I could lay my hands on and was especially fascinated by books that helped me understand people better—that described their life situations, their thoughts, their relationships, their hopes and dreams and the obstacles to their realization. Without knowing it, I was gaining an appreciation for understanding the context of people's lives—for seeing how important that context is in determining what they are like.

When I went to college and took my first course in sociology, I was “hooked.” I found that there was a name for my interests: *sociology*.

This was an exciting discovery for me. In college I found an entire academic discipline centered around understanding the general context in which people live and analyzing how their lives are influenced by that context. I could not help wanting to read sociology, to take more courses, to immerse myself in it.

The intention of this book is to share some of the excitement and fascination of sociology, to make more visible the context of social life that affects us all, and to whet the appetite for more sociology.

This then, is an invitation to sociology, to look behind the scenes to a different way of viewing life.

As Peter L. Berger says, the discovery of sociology can change one's life. It can help one to understand better the social forces one confronts, the forces that constrain and free. This understanding has a liberating potential; by examining these forces one can stand somewhat apart from at least some aspects of society and exert more creative control over one's own life.



C. Wright Mills indicates that the liberating potential offered by sociology centers on understanding three main issues: (1) the structure of society—that is, how the essential components of society are related; (2) where one's society stands in human history and what changes are occurring in it; and (3) what type of people prevail in one's society, how they are selected for prevalence, and what types are coming to prevail.

Thinking of life in these terms, says Mills, is a quality of mind worth striving for. It is this “sociological imagination,” to use his term, that allows us to see beyond our immediate confines, to understand the broader social and historical forces at work in our lives, and to see ourselves more accurately through that perspective.