HARPERCOLLINS COLLEGE OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY

Norman Goodman

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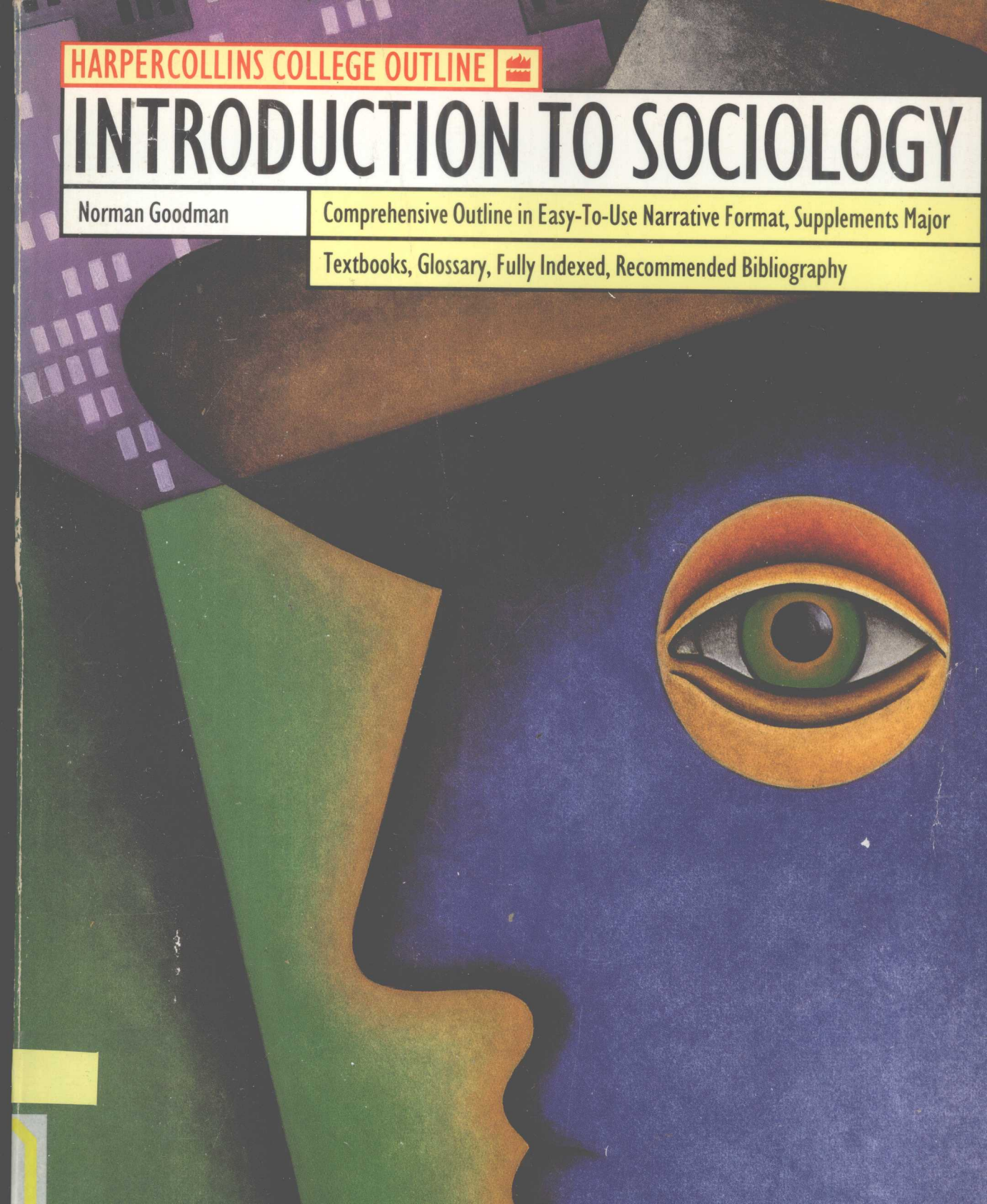

HARPERCOLLINS COLLEGE OUTLINE

Introduction to Sociology

Norman Goodman, Ph.D.
State University of New York at Stony Brook

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To the countless numbers of students who were my partners in the mutual and exciting adventure of teaching and learning sociology.

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Preface

Introduction to Sociology is a part of the HarperCollins College Outline Series. It is intended to provide the student and general reader with a review of the essential elements of the discipline of sociology in clear, readable form. It can be used as either a review for or a supplement to many of the standard comprehensive textbooks or as a concise though integrated view of the field in conjunction with an anthology or instructor-selected set of relevant readings in the field of sociology.

Sociology is a diverse field. This book introduces the reader to its unique perspective, its key concepts, and its modes of exploring the social world as well as its explanations of social phenomena. The wide-ranging interests of the sociologist are made evident and examples are used to tie abstract ideas to concrete experiences. The focus is always on making the material accessible to the consumer—the student and general reader.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the contributions of several key people to making this project a reality. Judith A.V. Harlan provided the absolutely essential professional discipline in the kind of delightful and supportive manner that kept this enterprise on track. Robert Weinstein provided invaluable and constructive scholarly and editorial criticism throughout the writing of this book. I am also indebted to Susan McClosky and Tannis McCammon, editors, and the fine secretarial assistance of Carole A. Roland for bringing this book to completion. Finally, my wife Marilyn deserves recognition for providing much needed love and support, as usual, during the complications this task necessitated in our joint life.

Norman Goodman
Stony Brook, New York
July, 1991

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What Is Sociology?

In this chapter, we will explore the different perspectives of the social sciences, and of sociology in particular, in their attempts to understand and explain human behavior. We will examine the scientific basis of sociology, its origins, and its present form.

PERSPECTIVES

The Social Sciences

Sociology is one branch of the *social sciences*, a set of disciplines that examines the nature of human behavior and of human association and the resultant products of both. In order to appreciate how sociology contributes to an understanding of social life, it is helpful to understand the perspectives of the other social sciences.

Anthropology has two main branches. One, *physical anthropology* deals with the human being as a biological organism. In studying our biological roots, our ties to other species, and the biological variations among us it focuses on human fossils and artifacts. The second branch, *cultural anthropology* was once concerned with the nature and evolution of preliterate societies. More recently cultural anthropologists have turned their attention to modern industrial societies as well, in particular to the culture (see chapter 3) and social structure (see chapter 4) of neighborhoods and communities.

Economics is primarily concerned with how we produce, distribute, acquire, and consume necessary resources. While its main focus is on wealth, it also studies other kinds of resources such as food and energy.

Economists study, for example, influences on and effects of the unemployment rate, prices of basic commodities, and the total value of goods and services produced in a society (its GNP, gross national product).

Political science delves into issues involving the sources, distribution, and uses of power in society. It studies political processes in various groups and organizations. Political scientists are particularly concerned with forms and practices of government.

Psychology examines the bases and consequences of individual behavior, focusing on what leads the individual to behave in particular ways. There are many subfields in psychology, including the personality of individuals, the development of their cognitive abilities, and the biological basis of human behavior.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

There is no single sociological perspective; rather, there are several distinctively different "schools of thought" within sociology. But they all share a view of *sociology* as the scientific study of human social behavior and human association and of the results of social activities.

The basic premise of sociology is that human existence is social existence. We are linked to one another and depend on others for our existence. We influence and are influenced by others; indeed, our very sense of identity depends on this interaction, as will be discussed in chapter 6. Any attempt to understand social forms apart from individual action is doomed to failure. Sociology offers a rounded view of the human condition.

The sociological imagination. C. Wright Mills (1959) used the phrase "sociological imagination" to alert us to the need to broaden our vision. Individuals tend to see the world from their narrowly constricted view of themselves and their immediate social circle. Sociology, he argues, should focus attention on the wider social forces that affect individuals. To illustrate his point, he postulates that if one person is out of work, that circumstance could be seen as his or her "personal trouble," and efforts to help deal with that situation would focus on the characteristics of the individual. If, however, a million or more people are out of work, that is a "social problem" that suggests the operation of large-scale social forces and requires a social solution. The sociological imagination allows people to transcend their limited personal experience and to see their connections to others and to the institutions of society.

The utility of the sociological perspective. The larger picture provided by the sociological perspective encourages people to understand the social forces that structure their lives. It allows people to see how their personal experiences influence and are influenced by existing social arrangements and social constraints. Sociology enables people to understand the general by abstracting from the specific.

Émile Durkheim and suicide studies. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim studied rates of suicide of both societies as a whole and in selected segments of societies (e.g., Catholics and Protestants, men and women, married and single people). When he looked at the specific suicide rates, he saw a clear pattern: suicide is a function of the person's degree of integration into the social group. From this he fashioned a general explanation of suicide in terms of social integration that cuts across the specifics of religion, gender, marital status, and ethnicity.

Sociology also uncovers the latent (often unintended or unrecognized) aspects of social life. People who commit suicide are generally unhappy. Durkheim's research showing the relative consistency of suicide rates across social categories suggests that social as well as individual factors affect suicide. But because suicide is viewed as an individual act, the social dimension is often overlooked. By adopting a sociological perspective on suicide, Durkheim uncovered its social aspect—how the degree and type of social integration influence suicide rates.

Marriage. If people are asked why they married their spouses, they are likely to answer that they fell in love with them; that the spouse is the one and only person who could make him or her happy. However, there are also social norms that guide that decision, that define a limited set of individuals as potential marriage partners. Most people are generally unaware of these constraining social forces on what seems to be an intimate and personal decision. Sociology reveals these usually unrecognized social influences.

Sociology and Science

Sociology is the *scientific* study of social behavior and arrangements. While typically the notion of science suggests laboratories, measuring instruments, and algebraic equations, it actually refers to a general approach to gaining knowledge about any phenomenon.

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF SCIENCE

All organized "scientific" approaches to acquiring information about the world share certain assumptions. One assumption is that a world of reality exists independently of our perception or knowledge of it. For example, atoms exist even though we can't see them. In this sense, we "discover" laws of nature rather than create them.

Another of science's assumptions is that there is order in nature. Events don't happen haphazardly; they have preceding causes. Scientists also assume that knowledge about the world can be gained through systematic and objective observation. This is the hallmark of science: the systematic, disciplined, and objective observation of phenomena. Scientific truth can be tested empirically, that is, by careful, objective observation and measurement. The scientific method reduces the intrusion of personal values into the research process.

In short, science assumes the existence of an orderly world of cause and effect that can be penetrated by rigorous, objective observation and measurement. Values may intrude in the choice of what topics a scientist studies, but not in the method of uncovering knowledge. Ever cognizant of human fallibility, scientists often take a skeptical view of knowledge and demand evidence to support assertions.

THE TOOLS OF SCIENCE

Theories. Theories are systematic ways of explaining how two or more phenomena are related, especially in terms of whether one causes the other. Their major value is that they allow the scientist to go beyond the immediate factors under study and "generalize" to other phenomena having the same characteristics. For example, Durkheim found that the suicide rates of Catholics and Protestants differed, as did those of married and single people. He explained these findings in terms of a theory of social integration that now allows an understanding of suicide rates based on factors not originally studied by Durkheim.

Various hypotheses and data. Theories are made up of *variables*, traits or characteristics that change or have different values under different conditions. Theories link variables in ways that allow the development of *hypotheses*, statements about how two or more variables are connected or about how one or more variables will or will not change as certain specified conditions are altered. Hypotheses are tested by examining what they predict against empirical *data*, observable information such as facts and statistics.

Science, then, constructs theories, derives specific hypotheses from these theories, and tests the hypotheses by collecting and analyzing relevant data. The results are then used to evaluate the theory or theories that generated them. Theories can be abandoned, modified or accepted. The construction of theories and the confrontation of those theories with empirical data is a hallmark of modern-day science.

SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

Sociology is no less a science than chemistry or physics. It constructs theories to explain social life. *General theories* attempt comprehensive explanations, such as Talcott Parsons's (Parsons and Shils, 1951) "general theory of action" linking culture, social structure, and personality. Less comprehensive theories, or *middle range theories*, are "special theories applicable to limited ranges of data" (Merton, 1957:9). These are more common in sociology today; for example, Merton's theory of reference groups.

The scientific method is the foundation of sociology. Studies reported in the major sociological journals generally have the same formal structure as research in the physical or biological sciences. Some general theory is presented, along with a specific set of hypotheses to be tested. The relevant

data are reported and analyzed, and conclusions are drawn from them about the appropriateness of the underlying theory.

The scientific status of sociology. While sociology is no less scientific than chemistry or astronomy, it does not seem to have the precision of either. In part that is because of its relative youth as a science. It has not had as much time to develop either its methodology or its theoretical conceptions. But more important, studying the behavior of people is not the same as studying the behavior of atoms or molecules or planets. People are more variable, and they change even while they are being studied. Also, sometimes reports of the results of a study cause people to change the behavior previously examined. These factors often mean that sociologists cannot generalize research findings as much as the physical or biological scientists can.

Sociologists confront another dilemma. While few people know much about the molecular structure of acids, most people consider themselves experts on the very things that sociologists study: crime, family life, social groups, and so on. Key concepts of sociological analysis are often framed in the language of everyday life, though the meanings of some words may be different. For example, *status* has a different meaning in sociology than it has in ordinary conversation. This confusion over words and the familiarity most people assume they have with the very substance of sociological analysis lead many to believe that sociology merely studies and states the obvious.

Sociology and common sense. Many "common sense" beliefs are simply untrue. For example, many believe that divorce is more common among middle and upper class couples than among lower class couples, or that most people on welfare really don't want to work. Both statements are false. Robertson (1987:9–10) lists twenty widely held "common sense" beliefs that sociological research has shown to be false.

The point is not that common sense is necessarily false but that sociology is a science. Sociology and common sense, therefore, need not be in conflict. In fact, common sense can be a rich source of hypotheses for sociologists. But sociologists go beyond the realm of common sense. They often take common sense notions about social life and subject them to rigorous testing that leads to their confirmation, rejection or refinement.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a relatively new science. While some sociological ideas go as far back as antiquity, the systematic attempt to understand and explain social behavior is less than 200 years old.

The Origins of Scientific Sociology

In general, people in stable societies are less likely to reflect on the social structures of their environment than people in unstable societies. The great upheavals of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. in Greece and the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries in Europe led respectively to the development of Western philosophy and to consideration of the nature of "social order." Sociology developed in the early part of the nineteenth century as a response to changing social conditions.

THE FOUNDERS OF SOCIOLOGY

Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Auguste Comte, a French philosopher, is considered the founder of sociology, having coined the term in 1838 to define a particular method of studying society. Comte's aim was to use this new science to cure social ills. He became increasingly obsessed with this goal, and his work acquired a religious fervor. Comte focused on two specific aspects of society: order and stability, which he called *social statics* and social change, which he termed *social dynamics*. These, Comte believed, are the factors that hold society together and that instigate change.

The major factor promoting stability, Comte believed, is the common set of beliefs among societal members. Comte viewed social change as an evolutionary process that moves society toward better and better states. Though his specific views no longer play a significant role in modern sociology, his focus on social change and his insistence on a rigorous scientific methodology have had an enormous influence on other social thinkers, thus guaranteeing Comte a permanent place in sociological history.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). Comte's work was developed further by the English sociologist Herbert Spencer. Spencer attempted to explain social order and social change by comparing society with a living organism. Using this "organic analogy," Spencer saw society as a "system" composed of interdependent parts. In his view, sociology uncovers the key social structures and examines how they function to produce a stable society. In certain respects he was a forerunner of the "structural-functionalist" school of sociological thought, discussed later in this chapter.

Spencer was particularly interested in the evolutionary concept of the "survival of the fittest" and applied it to the study of how societies change. His approach, labeled *social Darwinism* led him to argue that if left free from government interference, society would weed out the "unfit" and allow only the best to survive and reproduce. This concept was used to support laissez-faire capitalism in both England and the United States.

Karl Marx (1818–1883). A German-born social philosopher and revolutionary, Marx spent many years doing painstaking historical research into the nature of society.

Like Comte, Marx was interested in studying social structures and social processes in order to improve society. His views became the basis for the "conflict school" of sociology, discussed below.

Marx believed that the fundamental "laws" of history could be found in the economic structure of society. He saw society as divided into two classes, those who own the means of producing wealth and those who do not; essentially, the "haves" and the "have-nots." This division, Marx believed, inevitably gives rise to "class conflict." Marx viewed the history of the world as a history of class struggle: lords against serfs, masters against slaves, capitalists against the proletariat.

According to Marx, the contradictions inherent in capitalism cause economic crises, which give rise to new social structures. This view, called *dialectal materialism*, assumes that the newly created structures will be an improvement on the older, more repressive ones. For this reason, Marx did not see conflict as bad but rather as a means of progress.

Marx's influence on sociology is still felt. While his view that economic factors are the most powerful influences on society is somewhat less accepted, most sociologists do grant their importance in social life.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). Durkheim's influence on sociology is not limited to his work on suicide, discussed above. Durkheim, influenced by Spencer and Comte, was especially interested in what holds society together; the problem of social order. His approach was essentially functionalist; he explored what function various social elements serve in the maintenance of social cohesion. He focused on the importance of shared beliefs and values ("collective conscience") and on collective ritual.

Durkheim believed that society is held together by the form of its social structure. In early society, which was less complex and less specialized than today's, people were linked because of their similarities. Most people did similar things; they were generalists. This sameness linked them through what Durkheim called *mechanical solidarity*. As society became more complex and differentiated, people took on specialized tasks that were necessary to each other. Durkheim called this kind of bonding through mutual support and interdependence *organic solidarity*.

Durkheim also contributed to sociological methodology. He argued that sociology must study social "facts" or forces that exist outside of individuals and constrain their behavior. He believed that people incorporate these constraining social influences into their identity, thereby transforming "social control" into "self-control" (see chapter 6).

Max Weber (1864–1920). German sociologist Max Weber has exerted enormous influence on contemporary sociology. He contributed both to the development of sociological knowledge and to sociological methodology.

Weber's main focus of study was social action. He was particularly interested in the values, beliefs, intentions, and attitudes that guide and direct our behavior. He developed a methodology, *verstehen* (understanding or insight), to uncover these underlying factors. Weber argued for a "value-free" sociology, the elimination of preconceptions and biases in the research process. In another innovation, he conceived of the *ideal type* the construction of a concept of a phenomenon that captures its essential elements and against which the real-world phenomenon might be compared.

An important aspect of Weber's work is in response to issues raised by Marx. Weber saw economic elements as but one of several important influences on social life. He attributed substantial importance to the social status derived from personal characteristics or esteem and to political power, the ability to influence the actions of others.

Weber's studies of organizations, especially bureaucracy, still influence research and theory in this area. He linked the rise of capitalism to the values and attitudes contained within the theology of developing Protestantism. And his research into various religions contributed an understanding of the roles of culture and social structure in theology.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918). Georg Simmel rejected the organic analogy of Spencer. He saw society as an "intricate web of multiple relations between individuals who are in constant interaction with one another" (Coser, 1977:178). The form that this interaction takes was the focus of Simmel's work. This approach, called *formal sociology*, could be used to study quite different spheres of social life (e.g., family interaction, business dealings, the legislative process). Simmel's ability to find common elements in the formal structures of these diverse types of interaction contributed to the further development of sociology.

Simmel's work led to research into "social types." His detailed analysis of the phenomenon of the "stranger" captured the subtleties and nuances of this social role. Contemporary discussions of the poor owe much to Simmel's descriptions of this social type. He saw the stranger as someone who is only marginally involved in a social group, technically a member but not fully accepted or integrated into it.

Contemporary American Sociology

Modern American sociology is built upon the theories described above. The earliest of these theories (Comte's and Spencer's) focused primarily on society, a large-scale social unit, and are called *macrolevel* theories. Other theories (facets of Weber's and Simmel's theories) deal with smaller units like the group and the dyad and are called *microlevel* theories. Many theories have both macro- and microlevel aspects. However, most contemporary theories in American sociology are primarily at either the macro- or the microlevel.

We will now look at two macrolevel theories—the "structural-functionalist" perspective and the "conflict" perspective—and at three microlevel theories—"symbolic interactionism," "ethnomethodology," and "exchange theory."

MACROLEVEL THEORIES

The structural-functionalist perspective. This theoretical orientation, defined in large part by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the sociologists Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton and Kingsley Davis, is well known to the biological sciences, which use it to examine the structural aspects of organisms, their interrelationships, and the functions they perform for the organism as a whole.

The basic premise of this perspective is that *one can explain various phenomena, particularly social structures, in terms of their consequences (or "functions").* Malinowski (1948), for example, explains the practice of magic among the Trobriand Islanders in terms of the sense of control it gives them over those activities that are both important and uncertain, like fishing on the high seas as opposed to fishing in the relatively safe lagoon.

An element in this perspective is the notion of *system,* the idea that *the various elements of society are related to one another in such a way that a change in one leads to changes in the others.* In the case of the Trobrianders, Malinowski argues that any analysis of this society must take into account the tie between the practice of magic and the economic impact of fishing on the entire community.

Parsons (1937; Parsons and Shils, 1951) was the foremost structural-functional analyst in American sociology. And like Parsons, most contemporary functionalists find Spencer's analogy useful in focusing on society's structural elements (e.g., social institutions, organizations, groups, social statuses) and their consequences (functions) for society as a whole.

In Parsons's view, society is a relatively stable, well-integrated social system whose members generally agree on basic values. Society tends to be a system in equilibrium or balance. Since any social change has widespread disequilibrating effects, change tends to be frowned upon unless it occurs slowly enough to allow the system time to adjust.

Merton (1957) refined and modified Parsons's functionalism. He points out that an organization can have both *manifest functions,* consequences that are known or expected, like the vote-gathering responsibilities of political machines, and *latent functions,* functions that are unintended or unexpected, such as the social service aspects of political machines in, for example, distributing food to the poor and helping them deal with the complexities of public welfare and public housing. Merton also points out that structures

may have *dysfunctions*, negative consequences, as well as *eufunctions*, positive consequences. Further, a structure might be eufunctional for some part of society and dysfunctional for another part.

Not all social structures are functional for society, Merton argues; some can be eliminated with little significant effect. For example, Costa Rica gets by with no military institution. In other cases there may be *functional equivalents* to a particular social structure. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s many young people viewed communes as functional equivalents to the family. Today, some accept gay and lesbian couples as the functional equivalent of the marital couple, as is shown by their legal recognition as "domestic partnerships" in several major cities.

Critics of the structural-functionalist perspective point out both logical and pragmatic problems with this approach. They insist that some of the primary elements of the theory involve circular reasoning. To argue that a structure exists because it fills a certain need, and that because it fills a need it therefore must exist, adds little to our understanding, they point out. Further, they insist that the vagueness of the key terms *equilibrium* and *balance*, which were borrowed from biology where the consequences of a lack of balance (change in body temperature or blood pressure, for example) are clearly evident and measurable, does not add to our analytic power.

A third criticism, one with political implications, is that in viewing stability as all-important and decrying social change as disruptive, the structural-functionalist view is inherently conservative. Thus, functionalists are seen as supporting the status quo, the existing social arrangement. Critics argue that change is both necessary and desirable, that the American Revolution would not have occurred if the functionalist view had held sway, and that the civil rights and feminist movements would not be seen as beneficial.

One major alternative view to that of the structural-functionalists is "conflict theory," to which we now turn.

Conflict theory. The basic orientation of this perspective, derived from the work of Marx, *focuses on the conflict and competition between various elements in society*. The Marxist version looks at competition between social classes. Many contemporary conflict theorists (e.g., C. Wright Mills, 1956; Ralf Dahrendorf, 1959; and Randall Collins, 1974) focus on conflict between various racial, ethnic, and religious groups as well as on gender and class conflict. Conflict theorists note the seminal work of Simmel, who pointed to the divisive as well as to the consensual forces in society. Societies, he argued, have both associative (binding) and disassociative (disintegrative) pressures, and the relative weights of these pressures will vary at different times.

Lewis A. Coser, a major contemporary theorist influenced by Simmel, argues not only that conflict is inherent in society but also that under some conditions it serves very positive functions (1956, 1967). Conflict may help to clarify certain key values, Coser believes. Multiple group affiliations, which functionalists see as weakening consensus, are viewed by Coser as a mechanism for maintaining some level of stability by preventing a single axis of cleavage in society. Our belonging to different classes, ethnic groups, religions, and even genders keeps any one of these from dividing society into two mutually exclusive and continually warring camps. The social fabric is kept from being torn apart by divisive forces because of our varied and interconnected identities. Coser, in effect, blends aspects of functionalist analysis and conflict theory.

Whereas the functionalists decry change, conflict theorists tend to welcome it. Where functionalists see positive consequences of existing social arrangements, conflict theorists look for the winners and the losers, and assume both exist. In short, conflict theorists tend to have a more dynamic view of society and a more positive view of change.

Critics of conflict theory point to its tendency to focus on the divisive and conflictive aspects of social living, while ignoring the many harmonious and consensual processes that bind members of a society to one another. While functionalists have been accused of being politically conservative, conflict theorists have often been criticized for being politically radical, applauding if not fomenting change regardless of its consequences.

MICROLEVEL THEORIES

By and large, microlevel theories examine face-to-face interaction.

Symbolic interactionism. Though it was influenced by Weber, this school of thought is mostly indebted for its existence to the intellectual activities at the University of Chicago during the first third of this century, and particularly to the systematic thinking of the social philosopher George Herbert Mead. Symbolic interactionism starts with the premise that interaction is the primary social process. This interaction takes place through "symbols," representations that have agreed-upon meanings (see chapters 3 and 6). In fact, meaning derives from the interactions among sentient (thinking, feeling) beings.

Symbolic interactionists focus on the issue of identity, particularly the sense of self, which they argue is a social product. They analyze the social process through which identity develops, primarily meaningful social interaction (see chapter 6). They also focus on the nature of social interaction and how it occurs within a context of socially relevant understandings and considerations.