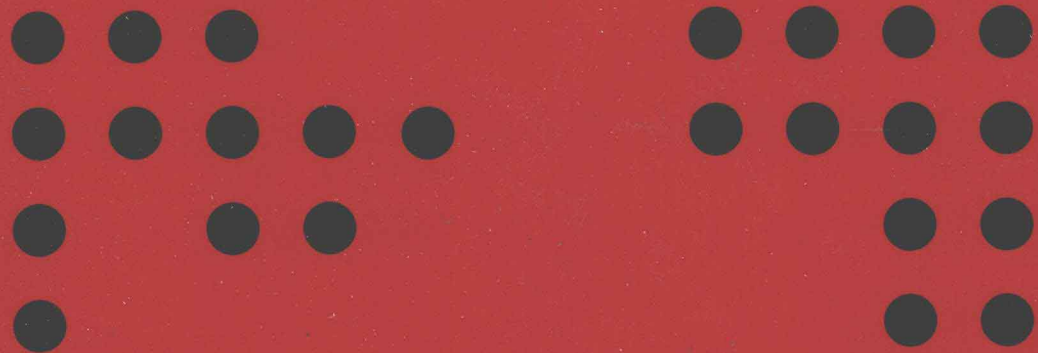
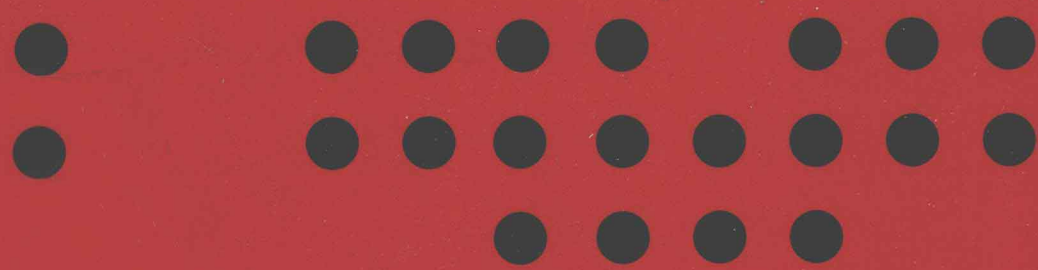


Introduction To  
**MACROSOCIOLOGY**



James W. Russell



# Introduction to Macrosociology

**James W. Russell**

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Autónoma de México  
and  
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Prentice Hall  
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

RUSSELL, JAMES W.,

Introduction to macrosociology / James W. Russell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-13-485889-1

1. Macrosociology. I. Title.

HM51.R885 1992

91-7449

301'.01—dc20

CIP

Acquisitions Editor: Nancy Roberts  
Editorial/production supervision  
and interior design: Mary Araneo  
Cover design: Patricia Kelly  
Prepress buyer: Debra Kesar  
Manufacturing buyer: Mary Ann Gloriande



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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-485889-1

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*  
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*  
Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*  
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*  
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*  
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*  
Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*  
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

for my daughters,  
Julia and Magdalena,  
and for Armida,  
with love

# Preface

The classic nineteenth- and early twentieth-century founders of sociology began their quest for objective social knowledge by addressing the large, macro-level questions—where did their societies come from, what were their characters, where were they going? Put more exactly, they sought out the origins of Western capitalism; analyzed its major economic, political, and social institutions; and tried to predict future developments. Sociology's original intellectual mission was thus to analyze societies and social life objectively. Its promise was that by doing so it could help people make collective sense of the social conditions within which they lived.

As we approach the third millennium, understanding the large questions of social life has become even more important. Societies have grown more complex. People have become caught up in ever-more-intricate and extensive sets of economic, political, and social relationships which transcend national boundaries. New problems of social life have grown up alongside old, unresolved ones. Despite spectacular technological advances in this century, social contradictions abound. Astronauts travel in space but fear to walk crime-ridden streets. Stretch limousines crawl uneasily down New York City's crowded streets past growing legions of homeless people.

The following text was written to introduce sociology in a way that maintains the classic, macro-level focuses of its founders—to provide conceptual tools for addressing the large questions of social life, such as, for example, making intelligent sense of changes sweeping Eastern Europe and parts of the Third World or the breakout of wars in Central America and the Persian Gulf. The text therefore incorpo-

rates a comparative approach in which types of past and present societies and their major economic, political, and social features are examined.

The macrosociological orientation of the text is not meant though to be an exclusive focus that denies or neglects the important classical contributions that have come from more social psychologically oriented microsociological concerns. Conceptualization of the relationship between individuals and societies—between psychology and sociology—is a necessary foundation for all social knowledge and research. The text therefore of necessity includes discussions of microsociological, as well as macrosociological, issues and concepts.

The logic of presentation of the text is to begin in Chapter One with an introductory description of sociology as a field of study. From there the text progressively builds up the conceptual apparatus of macrosociology. Chapter Two, *Individuals and Societies*, describes the basic terminology that sociologists use to conceptualize and analyze social life in all types of societies. Chapters Three through Six contain descriptions, analyses, and discussions of different types of past and contemporary societies. Chapters Seven through Ten are devoted to discussions of major sociological units of analysis: class, race, gender, organizations, the family, and population. The text ends with a final chapter on techniques of social research. I recommend that Chapters One through Six be read first and in order since they contain themes that build. Chapters Seven through Eleven can then be read in any order.

In my experience the best way to learn a new discipline is to study its basic concepts. For that reason basic sociological as well as other social science concepts are progressively introduced, discussed, and defined throughout the text. Each chapter concludes with a list of its key concepts, and following the final chapter there is a complete glossary.

This text in many ways is the long term product of my attempts to teach sociology in a manner that encourages historical, critical, and international thinking about contemporary social concerns. As such it has developed out of the practice of teaching and learning from students at universities in San Francisco, along the U.S.-Mexico border, in the Pacific Northwest, the Northeast, and Mexico City. Those students were the sounding boards and constructive critics for much of the modes of expression and explanation that follow. From a distance, I therefore express my gratitude. Intellectual debts—some recent and some long standing—are also owed to a number of individuals who I have had the good fortune to encounter along the way. These include Hans H. Gerth, Maurice Zeitlin, Harvey Goldberg, James O'Connor, James P. O'Brien, Carolyn Howe, Jerry Lembecke, Alexander Taylor,

Angela Morales, and Sevin Hirshbein. Nancy Roberts, Mary Araneo, and Sally Ann Baily at Prentice Hall provided encouragement and skilled and very helpful editorial assistance. The manuscript also benefited significantly from the suggestions of Prentice Hall's reviewers: Robert K. Miller, Jr., of the University of North Carolina, Wilmington; and Saul Feinman of the University of Wyoming for which I am also grateful. All of the above are of course absolved of responsibility for any errors of fact, style, or just plain thinking that may remain.

# About the Author

Educated at the University of Wisconsin, where he received his Ph.D., James W. Russell has taught at a number of universities in the United States and Mexico. He is currently associate professor of sociology at Eastern Connecticut State University. In 1990 and 1991 he was a Fulbright lecturer and researcher at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City. His previous book, *Modes of Production in World History*, was published in 1989.



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# Sociology

Sociology is most commonly defined as the scientific study of societies and social life in general. The fundamental premise of sociological explanations is that most of human conduct occurs and is shaped within group and social contexts. It follows that the social properties per se of societies are important determining factors of human conduct and therefore significant topics for research.

## HISTORY

The word sociology—a hybrid of the Latin *socia* or society with the Greek *logos* or knowledge—first appeared in 1837 in a writing by the conservative French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Sociology was an offspring of Comte's positivist philosophy which incorporated the principle that valid knowledge could be produced only by following rigorous and demonstrable scientific techniques. In particular, Comte was interested in developing a scientific approach to social understanding, as opposed to one based upon metaphysical, ideological, religious, or moral values. For that purpose, he offered the positivist prescription that the scientific methods developed in the physical sciences be directly transferred to the social sciences where they would presumably yield objective value-free social knowledge. Comte developed his ideas for the formation of sociology in reaction against, on the one hand, socialist ideologists who criticized nineteenth-century European industrial capitalist society as it was developing, and on the other, religious writers who evaluated societies on the bases of theological and moral concerns.

Ironically, the types of socialist writers whom Comte was most critical of were also concerned with developing a scientific understanding of society. Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Frederick Engels (1820–1895) devoted an entire section of “The Communist Manifesto” to criticizing socialist writings which were based on religious and moral rather than scientifically founded criteria. But Marx and Engels never called themselves sociologists, in part because of the conservative connotations of the term in Comte's hands. They saw themselves rather as founders of *scientific socialism*, by which they meant socialist change based upon the discoverable (and dialectical) laws of history.

In many ways Comte, the conservative and positivist, and Marx, the revolutionary and dialectical thinker, established the poles of Western sociology. They shared a common desire that the study of society be scientific. But they differed profoundly over how to develop a scientific study of society and the political implications of that endeavor.

Sociology, whichever its guise, Comtean or Marxian, emerged as

midnineteenth-century Europe was undergoing rapid economic, political, and social transformations. The industrial revolution, roughly between 1780 and 1820, and capitalist development in general, altered the physical and social landscapes of European countries by propelling the growth of factory life and cities. Country peasants became urban workers. The slow pace and certainty of rural life gave way to the seeming chaos, long work days, and uncertainties of urban life for increasing proportions of the population. At the same time political revolutions swept across Western and Central Europe, continuing the trend set off by the 1789 French revolution. Old autocratic governments ruled by royalties and aristocracies were increasingly swept away to be replaced by republican forms of government which rising business classes could influence and control more easily. In the face of the rapidity and dizzying scale of these changes, as well as the life-altering nature of their consequences for millions of people, the realization grew that the understanding of society in and of itself was problematic. If in the past rural-based agricultural society, where the pace of social change was very slow, one could with fair confidence predict the foreseeable future because it would not be that different from the present, in the new conditions in which Europeans found themselves, certainties about the likely shape of things to come evaporated. Social knowledge could no longer be assumed. It had to be produced.

By the second half of the century, the term sociology was in wide circulation. To some extent it was simply a catchall and convenient label for general writings about societies which did not seem to fit neatly into the existing and already defined categories of political economy, history, or philosophy. But it was also becoming a recognized and respectable academic discipline. By 1900, universities in France, England, and the United States had established departments of sociology which awarded degrees.

Throughout the twentieth century, sociology expanded further, primarily as a result of two developments. First, as governments increased spending on education, welfare, and other social programs, they enlisted the aid of sociologists. Second, universities in the United States—the country which has the greatest number of sociologists—expanded sociology departments in the aftermath of perceived social crises. In the 1920s, as mass migrations from Europe and the South caused rapid growths of northern and eastern cities to the point that elites feared that they would become ungovernable, universities expanded sociology programs. Sociologists from that era turned out a number of now classic studies of urban lower classes, ethnic minorities, and patterns of urban development. In the middle and late 1960s, when riots broke out in large numbers of black ghettos, universities

likewise expanded their sociology programs both because students sought such courses and because they thought that increased social knowledge could help to avoid future riots.

Today sociology is a recognized academic discipline in most parts of the world. As the discipline has developed and expanded, it has generated its own specialized fields, including demography, stratification, organizational research, family research, Third World development, the sociology of knowledge, criminology, and gerontology.

## SPECIALIZED CONCEPTS

In addition to having evolved an internal specialized division of labor (demography, stratification, etc.), sociologists have generated a large number of specialized concepts (such as social classes, roles, and norms) which they use to classify and explain the social properties of societies and social life.

Sociological work shares in common with all human work a basic method of approach. All laborers use tools to transform raw materials into products. Sociologists use their own types of physical and intellectual tools to transform raw data or observations about the social world into knowledge. Their physical tools include typewriters, filing cabinets, computers, and calculators. Their intellectual tools are explanatory concepts that are used to order and make sense of the data. The product of sociological work is presumed to be knowledge, which can take forms that range from simple self-clarification to books, articles, speeches, and social programs.

Concepts are the most important element of the sociological labor process. They are our fundamental intellectual tools for making sense of the social world. Facts rarely speak for themselves. They must be interpreted with the use of concepts, which are intellectual abstractions used to categorize and illuminate the essential meanings of real-world occurrences. Human language is built out of concepts which symbolically represent objects of human experience. Water, for example, is a word that is a concept or symbol which represents not this or that particular body of water, but rather what all bodies of water share in common. The meaning of the word water thus is an abstract concept constructed from the common properties of all particular examples of water. Sociologists have their own particular concepts which they use to name and analyze aspects of social experience. Such concepts include social class, power, roles, and norms. As with any trade, in order to learn it, one must become familiar with its tools.

The conceptual tools of sociology, however, are not as straightforward as one might wish. The concept of social class, for example, has



a variety of general connotations to people. Sociologists, on the other hand, have technical meanings in mind when they use the concept—meanings rather than meaning because sociologists do not always agree on the meanings of a number of such key concepts as social class. It follows that in order to be introduced to sociology, it is necessary to become familiar with the meanings of its key concepts. This is true even if there is disagreement among sociologists about which meanings are the most adequate. It is after all not unusual for workers to disagree over which tools are the most appropriate.

## SOCIOLOGICAL AND INDIVIDUAL EXPLANATIONS



Sociologists approach a number of society's problems from a perspective that is often different from that dictated by individual experience. For many social problems—such as alcoholism, unemployment, and crime—there is a tendency to assume that the individual alcoholic, unemployed person, or criminal is the source of the problem. In other words, perhaps because we live in a highly individualistic society, we tend to assume individual causation of social problems. Most sociologists acknowledge the obvious—that there are individual factors involved in social problems. It would be difficult to treat the problem of a particular alcoholic without at least focusing partially on that person's particular characteristics. But sociologists are more interested in investigating the less obvious social dimensions of such problems. In addition to describing the social consequences of the problem—alcohol consumption impairs driving ability and can lead to accidents, and alcoholism is a source of stress in many families which affects spouses and children—sociologists attempt to explain why either different groups have different rates of particular problems or how the structure of society itself may be responsible for part of the problem. To exemplify these less obvious sociological explanations, we will briefly look at two social problems—suicide and unemployment—and compare individual to sociological explanations.

Suicide, it is often said, is more of a tragedy for families and friends than for the victim. The families and friends must continue to live with the tragedy for the rest of their lives. They quite reasonably attempt to explain the suicide by looking to the person and her or his problems to try to determine what caused her or his despondency. This manner of explanation is logical, and it goes a long way toward explaining the causes of the suicide, but it does not go all of the way.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), a turn-of-the-century French sociologist, made the first systematic study of the social factors involved in suicide. Durkheim (1897) was struck by the fact that different coun-