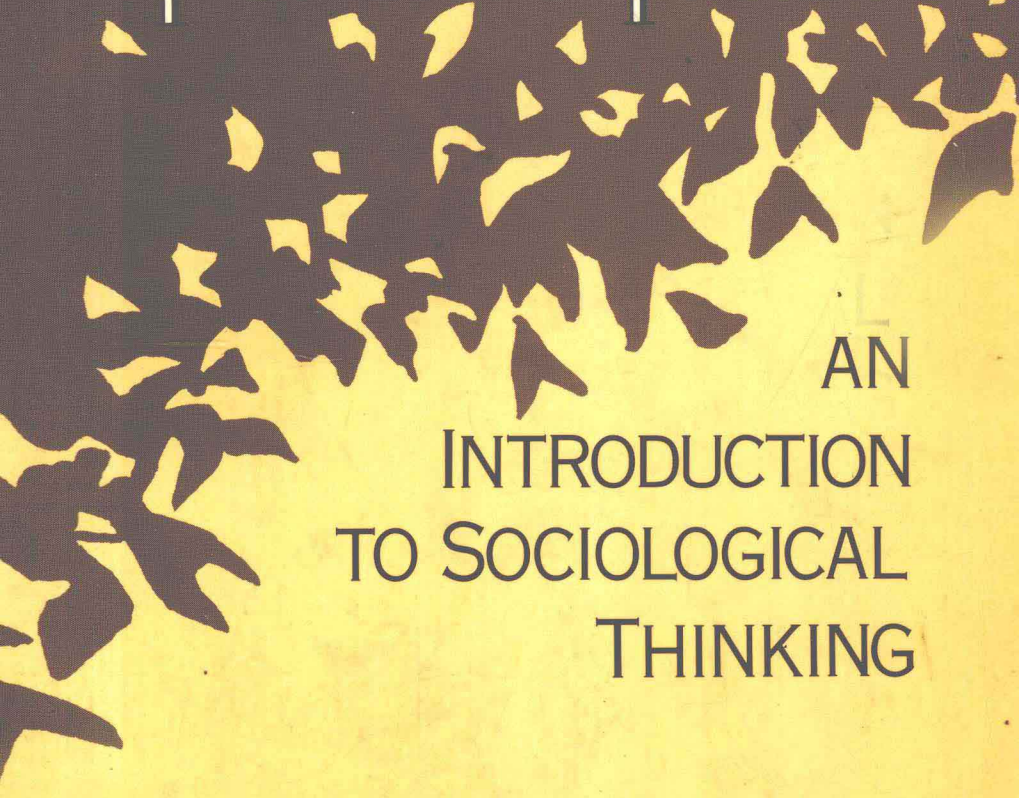


THE FOREST FOR THE TREES



AN
INTRODUCTION
TO SOCIOLOGICAL
THINKING

ALLAN G. JOHNSON

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PREFACE

On the most practical level, I wrote this book to provide a concise, critical introduction to the main conceptual and theoretical frameworks that make sociological thinking a distinctive approach to understanding the world. My deeper purpose, however, is based on the belief that we will not make substantial progress toward improving the human condition without developing and applying a collective ability to think about and understand social systems—how they operate, the consequences they produce, and the different ways in which we as individuals can choose to participate in them.

In this sense, *The Forest for the Trees* is not simply a description of what sociology is about; it is a deeply felt argument promoting sociological thinking as a way of approaching human life and as an alternative to the psychological individualism that so dominates thinking today, especially in the United States. It is my hope that readers will acquire not only some understanding of what it takes to think sociologically, but also a clearer sense of why the development of this ability is worth the effort.

As we go to press, I am mindful of those who have helped to transform this work into a finished book. I thank Robert K. Merton who, as Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's general editor in sociology, has once again offered up his generous supply of support and useful criticism; my editor David Watt, whose fine critical abilities and ear for smooth-flowing prose are in evidence on every page; Marcus Boggs and Rick Roehrich, who eagerly supported the idea for this book from the start; Linda Sands for her elegant design; and production manager David Hough, whose responsibility it has been to guide the book into print. And to Nora Jamieson, whose support for my life and work helps make each book I write part of a life whose richness I would trade for none other, go my abiding respect, love, and deepest appreciation.

Allan G. Johnson

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politics, are reduced to the personalities and behaviors of those who lead them; and the spiritual and psychological liberation of human consciousness is widely perceived as a New Age solution to social problems. The problems of poverty have been reduced to the habits and skills of the individual poor; war to aggressive impulses; drug abuse to the failure of individual will and good sense; extremes of inequality to individual poverty among nations to failures of leadership, talent, and will; and the ingrained prejudice and discrimination of sexism and racism to inadequate socialization resulting in personal ignorance and bad habits.

In short, we have embraced the idea that the key to understanding the organization of collective life lies in the internal and external manifestations of the individual life. Psychotherapy is increasingly identified not only as a means for enabling individuals to better understand themselves and chart new courses for their lives, but as a model for change at the social level as well. It is—to turn Karl Marx on his head—individual and not class consciousness that is widely perceived as the primary engine of positive social change. The solution to collective problems is perceived to lie not in collective solutions, but in the accumulation of individual solutions.

This view has been made possible by our increasing ability to be reflexive at the individual level, examining ourselves in order to be more aware, and think about and see ourselves in new ways. Our preoccupation is based on the growing importance of the *idea* of the individual as an entity that can somehow exist and be thought of apart from its social environment. Indeed, we have almost supplanted the idea of the social environment with the concept of the individual, as if groups and societies and even international systems are little more than a collection of individual psyches which, if understood psychologically, constitute all that we need to know about social life.

As appealing as this view is in the highly individualistic context of societies such as the United States, it fails to incorporate the crucial fact that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The whole is, to be sure, constituted of its parts, but it is more than that, and it is the whole that we tend to ignore in our fixation on the parts. In short, we miss the forest for the trees.

Unfortunately, for many people the idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts is obvious when made in reference to just about everything but human groups and societies; they resist the idea that there is anything about collections of people

that cannot be reduced to and understood solely on the level of individuals. After all, since individuals participate in relationships, if we understand each person, don't we then know all we need to know about relationships?

While William James and Sigmund Freud were laying the groundwork for the psychological dimensions of American individualism, European and, to a lesser degree, U.S. sociologists were trying to develop a different kind of reflexivity that would enable us to understand the *collective* nature of social life that cannot be reduced to its manifestations in the lives of individuals. At the core of this view is the concept of a social system—a set of relationships that can be thought of as a whole. A family, for example, is a set of relationships among kin, just as a soccer team is a set of relationships among various player positions, and a world economy is a set of relationships joining, among other entities, nations and corporations. Although they vary enormously in their size and complexity, each of these—family, team, and world system—is a social system.

Émile Durkheim proposed that social systems cannot be fully understood without looking at them as entities in and of themselves whose characteristics and dynamics are not a simple accumulation of the characteristics and behaviors of individual people. Consider the phenomenon of suicide, for example, which occupied much of Durkheim's attention, resulting in his classic study that was probably the first to use systematic data in pursuit of sociological questions.¹ On the one hand, suicide is undeniably a highly individualistic act in which people knowingly bring about their own deaths. If we ask why people kill themselves we would discover answers including feelings of depression, worthlessness, hopelessness, loneliness, and guilt, as well as factors such as altruism or duty that lead some to forfeit their lives to benefit others.²

A suicide *rate*, on the other hand, cannot be explained in the same way as an individual suicide. If the suicide rate for the United States increased by fifty percent over a short period of time—from 12 suicides per 100,000 people to 18 per 100,000—what would we conclude? With an individualistic perspective, we might simply

¹ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: The Free Press, 1951, Original edition, 1897).

² For a detailed summary of what is known about such factors, see David Lester, *Why People Kill Themselves* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1983).

“sum” individual explanations to arrive at a “collective” explanation, which is to say that the rate of suicide increased because of increases in the psychological factors that prompt individuals to kill themselves—in feelings of depression, despair, worthlessness, and so on. Or, in finding that the suicide rate is much lower in one group than another, we might attribute it to differences in the prevalence and intensity of suicide-prone psychological states.

On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with such reasoning except that it tells us nothing about *why* feelings such as depression increase in a society or why they are more common in one group than another or why people in one social category are more likely to respond to such feelings in a suicidal way (rather than, for example, reaching out to others for emotional support or entering psychotherapy). Individual explanations cannot answer such questions because they do not apply to groups and societies. To understand individuals, it may be sufficient to focus on their characteristics, but to understand social systems as well as their effects on people, it is necessary to focus on the characteristics of those systems which are usually quite different from those of individuals. Unlike people, societies cannot be depressed or lonely; but they can include social arrangements that foster such feelings in people to varying degrees and they can encourage different ways of responding to them.

Rates are characteristics that describe social systems, not individuals. The fact that the suicide rate in the United States is roughly 12 suicides per 100,000 people tells us nothing about individuals: in any given year, each of us either commits suicide or we do not, and that cannot be determined from the rate. What the rate does indicate is something about the social environment in which populations of individuals live. When the rate differs substantially from one social system to another, then we know that something about the characteristics of those systems to varying degrees promotes or discourages suicide as an individual behavior. This does not mean that what we know about the psychological causes of suicide is invalid or useless in understanding suicide as a phenomenon, only that it cannot fully explain different *patterns* of suicide that vary from one period or social system to another.

This holds true for the enormous range of indicators such as rates, percentages, and averages that describe aspects of human life at the collective level—from crime, birth, death, morbidity, marriage, divorce, and economic productivity rates, to the percentages of a population who vote, attend college, are wealthy or poor,

work outside the home, believe in God, harbor racial prejudice, are victims of crime, attend baseball games, or support abortion rights, to averages for educational attainment, income, age at first marriage, number of children, weeks unemployed, or church attendance. In all of these cases the indicators would not exist were it not for the experiences and behaviors of individuals; however, the patterns they describe tell us not about those individual lives but the social contexts in which they are lived. Therefore, the explanation of such patterns must include the characteristics of those contexts.

"The whole is more than the sum of its parts" is an idea that manifests itself in many ways. In the most direct sense, it means that collective phenomena cannot be reduced to the simple sum of individual phenomena. To argue otherwise is like saying that all we need to know in order to understand a symphony is the frequency response of all the individual notes, how long and how loudly each is sounded, and which instruments play them. If we took all of the notes from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and spread them out on the floor, how many years of searching through that pile would it take to identify it as Beethoven's Ninth? The sociological answer is that the question is a false one because the "it"—the pile of notes—is no more Beethoven's Ninth Symphony than it is anything else; it is the arrangement of the notes in relation to one another that makes the symphony, and the arrangement cannot be derived from the notes, singly or as a collection.

On one level, of course, a symphony must have notes just as social systems could not exist without people, but the sociological point is that symphonies and societies are more than that, just as human beings are more than a bunch of carbon-related molecules and water (although on one level we certainly are that). It is the "more than that" that sociology in general is concerned with. In a sense, most disciplines are concerned with one or another perspective on "more than that," which is to say, with the rich elaborations that we find when we go beyond the (thus far) irreducible levels of atomic and subatomic physics. Were it not for the fundamental fact that every whole is more than the sum of its parts—whether it be a human being, a society, or a rock—it is unlikely that there would be much to hold our attention for very long. Life would then appear to us as programs "appear" to computers, to whom software is indeed no more than a linear sum of parts. It is form and structure, in short, and the infinite variety

that springs from them that make social life interesting. (While computers can certainly understand a program in a linear sense, I doubt that they will ever be able to appreciate the beauty of a program as a whole).

Social life cannot be fully understood simply by knowing about individuals without attention to the relationships that connect them to one another. If we observe a group of people hitting, injuring, and killing one another, we cannot simply conclude that they are engaging in what we know as warfare. War is not only aggressive behavior involving relatively large numbers of people—in fact, in tribal warfare it can involve a quite small number of people. It is neither the number nor the behavior that constitutes warfare; it is the social organization of the participants that differentiates random violence, riots, brawls, mobs, and warfare. In warfare, the society and not the individual combatant is the primary focus—the aggression is carried out in what are perceived to be the interests of the society as a whole, and individual participation is based upon identification with the society as well as (although not necessarily) with those interests.

If we ask individual soldiers to explain their participation in a war and then combine those responses, the result would most likely bear little resemblance to the social forces—the social conditions, government policies, goals, decisions, and so on—that actually caused the war. Soldiers generally do not fight for the grand ideological causes and national interests that prompt states to mobilize armies and declare wars. They are more likely to fight from a sense of duty to their countries or fear of appearing cowardly or unpatriotic to their neighbors, friends, and families; and once in combat, are motivated primarily to save their own lives and those of their comrades. Studies of the German army's performance during the final months of World War II, for example, found that the astonishing ability of small units to continue fighting under the most arduous conditions was due not to a deep belief in Nazi ideology or Germany but to the primary ties of affection and loyalty that bound individual soldiers to one another.³ Studies of American soldiers in Vietnam show similar results.³

³See E.A. Shils and M. Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1948):280–315; M. Van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); and C.C. Moskos, "Why Men Fight: American Combat Soldiers in Vietnam," *Transaction* 7(1), 1969.

What identifies warfare as a social activity is not simply what people do or why they do it, but the social forces that bring them together and organize their behavior as enemies or allies.

The same is true of all of the behaviors that constitute social life. If we think of a bureaucracy as simply a collection of people who behave in a bureaucratic way—who are obsessed with obeying the rules, who shuffle great quantities of paper, who continually worry about the person they are accountable to, who seem to care more about the rules and the organization than they do about people—we have it backwards, for it is bureaucracy as a social *arrangement* of people in particular kinds of hierarchical relations to one another that produces bureaucratic behavior, not the other way around. Bureaucracies—and families and sports teams and most other social systems—do not simply form spontaneously from the behavior of individuals; it is the behavior of individuals, rather, that is shaped and conditioned by bureaucratic social systems.

It is of course true, as some sociologists argue, that without people behaving in bureaucratically appropriate ways, there would be no bureaucracies, and in this sense social interaction is absolutely necessary to manifest a particular social arrangement.⁴ But the crucial point here is that a bureaucracy is not simply a type of behavior, since all of the specific behaviors found among bureaucrats can be found in other social situations as well. A bureaucracy is, rather, a set of relationships through which such behavior is organized and from which it emerges and takes shape. Without participants sharing the perception and the assumption that such an arrangement in fact exists, they would have no reason to behave in such characteristic and predictable ways.

Another distinction between wholes and parts lies in the observation that individual and collective interests are often quite different from one another. A mainstay of capitalist ideology, for example, is the belief that in a free market the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest by individuals will have outcomes that also serve the best interests of communities and societies as a whole.⁵ Individual profit is maximized when goods are bought or produced

⁴This is particularly true of the work of the symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer, whose ideas are more fully discussed in Chapter 5.

⁵For a critique of this, see Barry Barnes, *About Science* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), Chapter 5.

for a low price and sold for a high one. In the case of real estate this means that in a profitable market prices will steadily escalate with each new round of buying and selling. As many affluent communities in Connecticut and elsewhere have found, this does maximize the gain of each individual property owner; but on a collective level it can have disastrous consequences. In many cases, housing prices have increased so rapidly that people who are vital to the town's welfare—police officers, administrators, school teachers, fire fighters, maintenance workers, health workers, and so on—cannot afford to live there, which threatens even the most affluent towns' ability to provide basic services. This collective outcome cannot be derived from each individual outcome or their simple "sum." It can only be foreseen and understood if we take into account how communities are organized as social systems.

If the whole—whether a symphony, a chair, or a social system—is more than the sum of its parts, then we can think of it as being in some sense separate from and external to the parts that comprise it. Just as physical environments exert pressures and limitations on us (through temperature, terrain, the pull of gravity, etc.), so, too, the characteristics of social environments affect us in ways that are in some respects external to us even though it is only through our participation in them that they exist. And just as the characteristics of physical environments constitute the physical facts of life, so, too, the characteristics of social systems constitute what Durkheim called social facts.⁶

Social facts are "social" in two basic ways: they constrain the way people think, feel, appear, and behave; and they derive their authority from being generally perceived as being collective and external to the individual lives in which their effects are manifested. Consider language, for example, which is a fundamental part of every social system. A language consists of a set of symbols (words, numbers, mathematical notation, or musical notes and notation) and rules (grammar and syntax) that govern how the symbols are arranged to create different meanings. Language constrains and limits us because we are generally confined to its set of symbolic categories for constructing representations of what we think, feel, perceive, and do. If there is no word for something, for example, we are less likely to notice it as significant. In this sense,

⁶Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (New York: The Free Press, 1964. Original edition, 1895). See especially Chapter 1.

learning the names of things is an indispensable part of learning to focus attention on the world in a systematic and intentional way. As children acquire language, they literally narrow their world from the wide open, unfocused world of infant perceptions to the far more selective and cognitively and emotionally circumscribed world of adults.

Language both limits and empowers us. It empowers us by enabling us to construct representations of experience in symbolic terms and thereby think about, store, retrieve, and share them with others. It limits us by shaping the way in which those representations are made, confining us to a limited set of symbols. English, for example, is a particularly rich language because it includes many words that reflect more subtle shades of meaning than those found in most other languages. Two psychotherapists who conducted training workshops in Germany found that the German therapists they worked with preferred to do psychotherapeutic work in English because it allows them greater flexibility and power in describing their emotions. The Germans have even found that as their knowledge of both English and therapy increases, dreams with special emotional significance are more likely to occur in English.⁷

What makes language a social fact is that we generally see it as something whose ultimate authority rests outside of us as individuals and, by extension, to some degree outside of us as a collection of individuals. The rules of grammar are regarded as correct and therefore to some degree binding on us not because we say they are correct or because everyone agrees they are correct. Indeed, we have no way of knowing how most people in our society actually regard the rules of grammar. The constraining power of language lies rather in the weight of our *assumption* that it is part of our social environment and therefore relatively immune from the desires of individuals or collections of individuals to challenge or alter its meanings and rules of usage arbitrarily. In speech and writing we can violate those rules or misuse words all the time, but this is very different from claiming that the dictionary meanings of words or the rules of grammar and syntax are themselves false and should be changed or discarded. It is difficult to imagine an individual or group of individuals believing they had the authority to argue that

⁷Stuart Alpert and Naomi Bressette of the Hartford Family Institute, Hartford, CT, personal communication.

“book” is the word for what we otherwise know to be a “banana” or that “bananas eats he yellow” is or should be an acceptable way of communicating that “He eats yellow bananas.” This is because we regard language as part of our social environment, not part of individuals or groups of individuals.

It is of course true that language is not completely external to us or that we are powerless to change it. New words are added to our vocabulary at a sometimes astonishing rate and meanings of existing words change in response to how people actually use them. Language, like other aspects of social environments, is a dynamic phenomenon that shapes the lives of people and is, in turn, shaped by them. In this sense, to describe language as a social fact is not to say that language is nothing more than that; but it does say that every language is viewed to some degree as constraining and external to us, and this gives it social authority and importance. Language does not have authority as a part of culture because everyone actually uses it in a particular way; indeed, actual usage most likely violates the rules of language more often than not. The truth is the other way around: we assume that everyone will use language in a particular way because we assume it has authority as part of our culture, and it is this shared assumption that lies at the heart of social facts.

The same can be said of all kinds of cultural ideas, such as beliefs and values: we do not experience them as part of our social environment because most people actually support them; we think most people support them because we identify such ideas as part of our culture. What we identify as good and evil have an authority that transcends what we may actually think or believe at any given moment. When the “hero” stands up for a principle abandoned by a community in a frenzy of homicidal panic—such as happens with lynch mobs—and manages to carry the day, it is not the hero’s personal authority that has the power to sway others so much as the appeal to an authority that goes beyond mere numbers, to a shared sense of “we” that is more than the sum of individuals and what they believe or want at the time.

Although Durkheim first introduced the concept of social facts a century ago, thinking about social systems as something more than a collection of individuals has developed very little outside of academic sociology. It is true that some of the terminology developed through sociological thinking—such as altruism, folkways, ethnocentrism, in-group, out-group, stereotype, white-collar crime, minority group, anomie, role, significant other, and

self-fulfilling prophecy—has been incorporated into everyday usage, but although we may think in sociological *terms*, this is a far cry from thinking sociologically.⁸ In the twentieth century, sociological thinking has not generated the kind of collective reflexivity that would realize its enormous potential to expand human understanding and empower communities and societies to shape the terms of social life in better ways.

Especially in the United States since World War II, sociologists have gathered great quantities of data bearing on a staggering array of social phenomena and issues, and in cases such as the documentation of poverty, the effects of racial segregation, or the efficacy of capital punishment, these findings have had some effect on social policy. But this generally has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in awareness of and literacy in thinking about social systems *as* systems. As will be shown in Chapter 6, for all of the data gathered on the causes and effects of poverty in the United States, public debate still pays almost no attention to systematic analysis of changing social systems as a way of substantially alleviating it. Perhaps the main if not only exception to this general pattern is the development of organizational theory as applied to managing corporations, in which systemic problems are in fact often defined and dealt with as such. It is perhaps ironic that a field of study whose roots in this country were firmly planted in concerns about the horrible consequences produced by rapid capitalist industrialization in the late 1800s and early 1900s and the urbanization that went with it should now be most highly developed and appreciated by corporations.

The continuing collective inability to think sociologically has both social and personal consequences. For societies, the effect is felt primarily through the mistaken belief that social problems can be understood and solved as an accumulation of individual troubles and predispositions.⁹ This approach is guaranteed to fall short—as we can see in the intractability of most social problems, from poverty to drug use—because a society and the social problems it generates cannot be understood without paying attention to the social facts that underlie them. Good social

⁸See Robert K. Merton, "Our Sociological Vernacular," *Columbia* (November 1981):42–44.

⁹For a classic statement on the difference between personal troubles and social issues, see C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), Chapter 1.

consequences in a society are not necessarily the direct result of goodness in people, just as bad consequences are not the result of badness in people. This is not to deny that problems such as racism, sexism, and poverty involve individuals, or that social problems can be solved by paying attention only to social facts and not their individual manifestations. It does suggest, however, that our general inability to think in terms of social facts, as well as our preoccupation with the individual, makes it very difficult if not impossible to understand or effectively deal with social problems on a causal level.

Consider, for example, the situation of a community whose water supply is polluted by industrial emissions. People become sick in great numbers and the medical community responds by explaining why: they have toxins in their bodies. An antidote is dispensed to the population. As the population grows, the number of sick people, the manufacture of the antidote, and the size of the medical establishment all grow with it.

It is not inaccurate to define this situation as an individual problem, for it certainly is that on one level. But to act as though the biological system comprising an individual is the only or even most meaningful unit of causal analysis is so narrow and short-sighted that it leads to an endless cycle of disease and treatment that will only grow worse as population and production grow. A second approach might be to install equipment to purify the water, defining the problem on the level of the reservoir as part of an ecological system that includes the community but not the industrial society that produces the pollutants. This is a more effective approach, but only until other effects of air- and rain-borne pollutants are discovered, such as lung cancer, defoliation of forests, contamination of crops, and destruction of other species in the ecosystem. The problem is that it is generally in the nature of systems—whether they be ecosystems or social systems—that their various elements do not have isolated single effects on one another, but interact in complicated ways difficult to identify and deal with on a one-by-one basis.¹⁰

The most effective solutions are ones that reach farther and farther back in the causal chain and farther and farther out to

¹⁰ For a sociological analysis of the consequences of this kind of complexity in highly technological systems such as nuclear power, see Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).