

THE SOCIAL WORLD:

An Introduction to Sociology

An abstract graphic design featuring a network of interconnected spheres and lines. The spheres are in various colors including red, blue, green, and purple, and are connected by thin black lines. The background is a dark, textured gradient of purple and blue. The overall aesthetic is that of a scientific or technological network.

Edited by
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THE SOCIAL WORLD:

An Introduction to Sociology

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THE SOCIAL WORLD: *An Introduction to Sociology*

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The resulting book is, of course, imperfect, but we accept responsibility for the flaws that remain. We hope the book will achieve the purpose for which it was written: namely, to better inform our students, a new generation of sociologists, about the history, goals and methods of this most interesting enterprise in which we share, the discipline of sociology.

TABLE of CONTENTS

Sociology and Society *Lorne Tepperman*

- | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|----|
| 1 | Sociology: The Science of Society | <i>Anton L. Allahar</i> | 7 |
| 2 | Sociological Methods of Research | <i>Peter Li</i> | 35 |
| 3 | The Practice of Applied Sociology | <i>Edward Harvey</i> | 59 |

Processes of Social Organization *Lorne Tepperman*

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------|-----|
| 4 | Population Processes | <i>Lorne Tepperman</i> | 87 |
| 5 | Culture, Change and Autonomy | <i>Susannah Wilson</i> | 113 |
| 6 | Socialization | <i>Susannah Wilson</i> | 135 |
| 7 | Aging and the Life Process | <i>Maureen Baker</i> | 153 |
| 8 | Control and Deviance | <i>Austin T. Turk</i> | 177 |

Types of Social Organization

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| 9 | Roles and Interactions | <i>Nancy Mandell</i> | 205 |
| 10 | Gender and Gender Relations | <i>Maureen Baker</i> | 233 |
| 11 | Families | <i>Maureen Baker</i> | 261 |
| 12 | Social Movements | <i>Robert Brym</i> | 285 |
| 13 | Formal Organizations and Bureaucracy | <i>R. Jack Richardson</i> | 309 |
| 14 | Race and Ethnic Relations | <i>Peter Li</i> | 335 |
| 15 | Class and Stratification | <i>Gordon Darroch</i> | 361 |
| 16 | Communities, Cities and Urbanization | <i>William Michelson</i> | 399 |

Central Institutions of Society *Lorne Tepperman*

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| 17 | Economic Institutions and Power | <i>R. Jack Richardson</i> | 435 |
|----|---------------------------------|---------------------------|-----|

| | | | |
|----|--|--------------------------|-----|
| 18 | Political Institutions and Authority | <i>Peter R. Sinclair</i> | 457 |
| 19 | Law and Society | <i>Austin T. Turk</i> | 485 |
| 20 | Mass Media and Influence | <i>Susannah Wilson</i> | 503 |
| 21 | Educational Institutions and Knowledge | <i>Raymond Murphy</i> | 521 |

Processes of Change *Lorne Tepperman*

| | | | |
|----|---|-----------------------------|-----|
| 22 | Historical Patterns of Change and Development | <i>Anton L. Allahar</i> | 553 |
| 23 | Technology and Social Change | <i>Willem H. Vanderburg</i> | 579 |
| 24 | Ideology, Social Order and Social Change | <i>Anton L. Allahar</i> | 607 |

| | | |
|--|--------------|-----|
| | Bibliography | 633 |
| | Index | 668 |

SOCIOLOGY and SOCIETY

Sociology is the science that constructs theories about the social relations making up a society. Let's consider what this means.

This apparently simple definition hides some important difficulties. For sociologists, the word *science* means much the same as for physicists or biologists: namely, the construction and validation of theories about the real world. A science of social relations is more complex than one concerned with atoms or amoebae. But, in principle, the goals of all sciences are the same.

Theories are, for sociologists as for physicists, tentative explanations of observable reality and the basis for predicting future events. Every theory is judged against competing theories in terms of thoroughness and economy of explanation. A science tests and retests its theories to improve and even discard them in favour of better ones.

Social relations are any relationships between people that are somehow binding. In this sense, the subject matter of sociology is the *social bond*, which connects individuals in groups and societies.

Societies, then, are collections of social relationships. A society is made up of all the families, clubs, groups, corporations, understandings, arrangements and rules that its members share. Seeing the boundaries of a given society is sometimes difficult, for many social relationships may span an international border, like the one between Canada and the United States. Indeed, some writers have wondered whether Canada and the United States, which are certainly distinct nation-states, are really distinct societies. (Others, for similar reasons, have wondered whether the two are distinct economies, since they are so closely tied by trade and the flow of migrants.) Yet, in principle, the idea of a "Canadian society" still has value to sociologists, as to others.

The Character of Sociological Theories

The theories sociologists construct have certain characteristics. As noted earlier, they are tentative, thorough and economical. But they should also be *true*, as far as we can tell. Sociologists, being human, may become blinded to what is true and false. Our intellectual shortcomings, personal interests and values may mislead us. To reduce the risk of this, sociologists use agreed-upon methods of discovering, confirming, and communicating their findings and theories.

Sociological theories should not be circular or tautological, i.e. true by definition. A theory that “satisfied workers are happy with their jobs” is tautological if what we mean by “satisfied” is “happy with their jobs.” Foolish as it may sound, many students and even professional sociologists make theories which prove tautological on inspection. A tautological theory, though true, has no value to science because it cannot be disproved.

A theory that is not tautological is open to *verification* or validation. Scientists, including sociologists, never prove a theory absolutely right; they only prove contending theories wrong. The theory that best survives multiple attempts at disproof and shows itself thorough and economical is considered the most valid.

Some of Einstein’s theories in physics waited for decades until equipment was developed to test their mathematically derived predictions. Likewise, some sociological theories are not immediately verifiable because they predict future events: for example, Marx’s theories about the coming of communism to industrial societies. Others cannot be validated because they assume the existence of invisible (i.e. unmeasurable) forces: for example, Freud’s theory of the unconscious. How remarkable that these very theories have taken a central position in social science, despite their problems of verification. On the other hand, Marx’s theoretical importance was established largely through analyses of past and present societies, and Freud’s through the treatment of neuroses, not through prediction.

Whatever the difficulties, verification must always be sought. Every theorist must appeal to objective evidence and reason over intuition, emotion and good intention in promoting his/her ideas.

Two other aspects of sociological theories are worth mentioning. First, theories should be *important* or socially relevant. Sociologists aim ultimately to understand the whole social world and not simply its smallest, most readily accessible parts. To sociologists, all social relations are of interest. But, as sociologists/citizens, we should keep our eyes on the public problems of our times. Sociology’s history shows the best work has been done by “middle range” researchers moving back and forth between pure theory and an active concern with on-going events. Still, sociologists should avoid promising results prematurely. Nothing undermines popular faith in any science more than false claims, even if motivated by good intentions.

Sociology that influences the way some portion of society is working is

called *applied sociology*. Applied sociology is being taught in more and more North American universities, largely because sociological application is becoming a bigger part of sociologists' on-going work. Each year, more graduate sociologists take jobs outside universities, applying their sociological knowledge to government and corporate decision-making. The chapter on applied sociology in this section describes how sociological theory and methods can be made socially relevant.

Finally, sociological theories should be *nonobvious* or counter-intuitive. Many accuse sociology of dressing up common sense in impenetrable jargon. This unfortunate idea, though apparently justified by many published works, is inherently wrong. Good theories do *not* just give us back what we already know. On the contrary, a good theory, by connecting previously unconnected facts, yields insights no one anticipated. The degree to which sociology succeeds in making such non-obvious theories is a measure of its maturity as a science. If sociology falls short, the failure is not for want of trying.

Like other scientists, sociologists create a conceptual language to work in: a set of terms, precisely defined, whose value may not be immediately obvious to the layperson. Like theory itself, theoretical language need not justify itself at every turn. It may not be obvious or easily penetrated, yet it will still withstand the charge of being jargon if, finally, it yields insights harder to reach in some other language. In this respect, mathematics is the prime example of a theoretical language that is not jargon; but it is not the only example. Sociology, too, has its own language.

Sociology Contrasted With Other Disciplines

Sociologist Kenneth Westhues has helped us better understand sociology by comparing it with other, similar activities. For example, sociology is different from journalism and history. Both journalism and history describe real events and to some degree base their descriptions on an interpretation or implicit theory. Sociology is different. It makes its theories explicit in order to test them. Telling a story is, for sociologists, less important than testing the interpretation on which the story is based. Sociology may be a good preparation for doing history or journalism, but it differs from these disciplines.

Sociology also differs from philosophy. Both are analytical — that is, concerned with making and testing theory. However, theorizing is quite different in these two fields. Sociology is resolutely *empirical*, or concerned with evidence grasped by the senses, and philosophy is not. This does not mean philosophy has a greater concern with the internal logic of its arguments. Sociological theories must stand up logically, but they must *also* stand up to observable evidence in a way philosophical theories need not. A sociological theory whose predictions are not supported by evidence

gathered in an agreed-upon way will not be accepted by sociologists, no matter how logical the theory may be.

Finally, sociology differs from psychology, which is also analytical, reflective and empirical. The difference here lies in the units of analysis. Psychologists study the behaviour of individual humans (or, occasionally, animals) under varied experimental conditions. Sociology's subject is the social relationship or group of relationships observed in nature: the family, group, or total society. Sociology and psychology come together in a field called social psychology; but even it is defined differently by sociologists and psychologists.

To summarize, sociology is concerned with making scientifically valid theories about social relations. These theories should be "scientific" in the usual meanings of the word. But certain methodological problems make the scientific study of social relations more difficult than the scientific study of atoms, amoebae, or even individual monkeys and humans.

Some Methodological Difficulties

First, we can rarely, if ever, experiment on groups or families, let alone societies. By "experiment" we mean the random assignment of cases to experimental and control groups, the careful manipulation of the experimental group, and the comparison of the two groups before and after manipulation. (This procedure is described further in Chapter 2.) Yet experimentation is the basic method of testing theories in physical and to a lesser degree in biological sciences.

The impossibility of experimentation in sociology leads us to develop alternative methods, none completely satisfactory. The sociologist must know and use a large variety of research methods. Any sociological theory must withstand a battery of weak tests, using many approaches, since strong (experimental) tests are not possible.

The second main difficulty lies in the existence of competing paradigms in sociology. *Paradigms* are ways of thinking. Different paradigms not only define which problems are key to understanding social relations; they also define which research procedures are most appropriate and which evidence most relevant. Paradigms have multiplied in sociology for many reasons, including: a strong philosophical (deductive) tradition in European sociology and an empirical (inductive) one in America and Britain; the rising and falling popularity of particular research techniques; and fluctuating political radicalism in the public mind and in the universities. The ambiguity of sociological method also contributes. If a sociological proof *must* consist of many weak approximations, room exists for many approaches, many paradigms.

A third main difficulty lies in the reactive nature of the sociologist's object of study. Sociologists and the people being studied all hold views likely to affect research outcomes. Usually these preconceptions bias the outcomes in favour of what the investigator expects. Some researchers think this

reactivity is desirable. They believe the sociologist's role is to combine study with social action: to discover, study and eliminate problems at the same time. Most, however, prefer to separate these activities in the interest of scientific precision. People, unlike atoms or guinea pigs, can and do monitor what scientists say about them. Indeed, most people have their own theories about how society works. Their actual or expected reaction to scholarly analysis contributes to the climate of disagreement within sociology.

A fourth problem is the nonrepetitiveness of history. If our subject is society itself, we must study many societies under different conditions, in hopes of finding "natural experiments." But sociologists will never find two societies identical in every respect except the one of theoretical interest. Always, new kinds of societies are found in new historical contexts. Consider the Industrial Revolution. It will never be repeated. For this reason, no theory about the Industrial Revolution can be tested as a physicist or chemist might test a theory. Of course, there are many different theories about industrialization, growth and development, even theories about why the Industrial Revolution first occurred where and when it did. Yet, theories about societies industrializing today are dealing with a different phenomenon: industrial development in the midst of an already industrialized, colonized world. Sociologists can apply their understanding of eighteenth-century England to studying industrialization in twentieth-century India, but only by making a great deal of allowance for the different contexts. In this respect, sociology faces a problem similar to the one facing biologists and ecologists, among others.

The Notion of a Social System

These methodological problems which prevent sociology from using true scientific method may never be fully overcome. On the other hand, several other factors make the scientific study of social relations somewhat easier. Social relations are *systemic*: they contain arrangements of parts that sustain one another in a given pattern over time. Some theorists have argued that all sociologists study social systems, and all social systems, large and small, have common features. If this is true, an understanding of social systems in general can be used to understand a particular case that is hard to study directly. Information about smaller, more accessible social systems can be used to develop and test theories about larger, less accessible ones.

Not all sociologists would accept this view. Many reject the explicit focus on social systems; they find the concept too limiting. Yet, a compelling result of system thinking is the discovery of the "unanticipated consequence," of which Robert Merton (1910-) has written a great deal. Research demonstrates that people are often constrained by the social relationships in which they participate, despite their own plans and wishes to the contrary. People (alone or in groups) are part of a larger, complex reality beyond their easy control. They are part of a *social structure*, as discussed in the next chapter and elsewhere in this book.

This observation has led sociologists to a unique understanding of public planning. More and more, applied sociology helps planners guard against the unanticipated consequences of their actions: against plans that will inevitably fail, produce undesirable social side-effects, or even prove “fatal remedies,” killing the patient in the process of curing. Only by understanding societies as social systems can planners intervene in ways that will actually work.

Unanticipated consequences prove a society is more than the simple sum of people and things, each with distinct properties that mix together. The combination of people produces complex interactions, as in chemistry and ecology. Eventually sociologists will fully understand these interesting, complex interactions.

The three chapters that follow develop some of the ideas put forward in this Introduction. “Sociology: The Science of Society” clarifies the discipline’s competing paradigms and discusses their historical background. It discusses two issues central to our discipline: namely, “free will versus determinism” and the concept of “social structure.” The second chapter extends our understanding of experimental and nonexperimental methods of research. Chapter 3, on applied sociology, shows how theory and method can be brought to bear on pressing current problems. These chapters come first in the book because they are the most basic. A good understanding of sociology’s subject matter and purpose means, first, understanding the discipline’s theory and method.

Sociology: The Science of Society

Anton L. Allahar

INTRODUCTION

SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY

Why History is Important

The Industrial and French Revolutions as Historical Watersheds

HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Enlightenment versus Romanticism

Sociology's Three Pillars: Marx, Durkheim and Weber

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The Influence of the Past

Man is Both a Creature and a Creator

THE IDEA OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Statuses, Roles and Norms

Society as a Collection of Interacting Parts

FREE WILL VERSUS DETERMINISM

APPROACHING SOCIETY

SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

Empirical Knowledge

Natural versus Social Science

CONTENDING PERSPECTIVES WITHIN SOCIOLOGY

Structural Functionalism

Marxism

Symbolic Interactionism

A Brief Assessment

CANADIAN SOCIOLOGY

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

It is exceedingly difficult, if not pointless, to attempt an exhaustive and all-encompassing definition of sociology. This is not to imply that what sociology is or what sociologists do is totally incomprehensible. Rather, it is meant to sensitize the reader to the fact that the scope of the discipline is wide-ranging, rich, complex and continually growing. For these reasons, a single definition will never suffice. It would be so broad and general that it would say very little. For example, defining sociology as “the study of social order, social disorder and social change,” though essentially accurate, is so general that it has little practical utility.

As a point of departure, therefore, it seems more appropriate to talk of such things as the aims, methods and uses of sociological inquiry — in other words, what sociologists do. Generally, sociologists try to make sense of that noisy blur of human activity called “society.” They try to define, describe, explain and interpret human behaviour within the contexts of social groups and institutions. Unlike the psychologist, who focuses on individual motivations and purposes underlying human behaviour, the sociologist is interested primarily in general and recurrent behaviour patterns, whether in small groups, specific social institutions, regions of a country or entire societies.

One thing that becomes immediately apparent to the student of sociology is the infinite complexity of the term “society.” It is so vast and dynamic that sociologists often compartmentalize various aspects of societal relations in smaller, more manageable units. One of the traditional divisions is between macrosociological and microsociological areas. The former refers to large-scale social interactions, such as the impact of unemployment on marriages or the relationship between religion and economic development. Microsociological issues, on the other hand, are small-scale behaviour patterns within groups and institutions. For example, how is power distributed within the family, or how are decisions made and implemented in specific office settings? Both the macro- and microsociological areas of concern share fundamental characteristics that serve to define the sociological outlook or approach.

SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY

WHY HISTORY IS IMPORTANT

Many of the essential insights of sociology are drawn from history. Most sociologists agree that individuals are not born with ideas, nor do ideas drop from the sky. Our basic modes of interaction, our social institutions, patterns of organization, communication, and conventions, in a word, our cultures, are history-laden. What occurs in any given society, therefore, usually takes history as its point of departure and builds on historical knowledge. As will be seen in the chapter on culture, the concept of society also implies language and communication.

Sociologists, then, may choose to ignore history at their own peril. For history is indispensable as a means of understanding future ways of behaving. History, understood as a social process that has generated a stock of knowledge relating to past failures and triumphs, is thus a lucrative repository of information. This does not mean, however, that understanding history alone is sufficient to understand society.

The sociologist must also realize that humans are rational, thinking beings possessed of a will. Hence, whether individually or in groups, they may choose to act contrary to the established historical pattern. In fact, they may not even know that a given pattern exists. It is the task of the sociologist to identify the pattern of social convention and then *explain* why it persists or dies out.

THE INDUSTRIAL AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONS AS HISTORICAL WATERSHEDS

Of the major modern historical processes, the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution have received the most sociological attention. Indeed, several social theorists have argued that sociology as a formal discipline was born as a reaction to the events surrounding these two major social developments (Zeitlin, 1981b; Collins and Markowsky, 1984:28; Nisbet, 1966; Seidman, 1983). The Industrial Revolution, which first took hold in England in the early eighteenth century, is generally described in terms of the social and economic changes which it wrought.

Among these were: the displacement of the peasantry from the land and their replacement by agricultural wage workers; the growth of industrial towns that drew people away from the self-sufficient villages of the countryside; the widespread production of marketable commodities, which changed informal barter and simple exchange relations in the absence of a formally constituted market; and finally, the creation of huge numbers of urban dwellers (both employed and unemployed) who were totally dependent on wage labour for their survival.

If the Industrial Revolution was characterized by sweeping social and economic changes, the French Revolution of 1789 is most remembered for its social and political consequences. The watchwords of the revolution — liberty, individuality, fraternity and equality — heralded a new way of life for French men and women in virtually all aspects of society and made possible the cry for political democracy. The bourgeoisie, a relatively new class of manufacturing, commercial, and industrial entrepreneurs, rivalled the monarchy, aristocracy and nobility for power. They challenged established authority and tradition and called for new rules of conduct that would free them to pursue their economic and political goals. The destruction of French feudalism thus became the *precondition* for the rise of this class, as well as other new classes.

HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

ENLIGHTENMENT VERSUS ROMANTICISM

Out of the ferment created by the French Revolution, some of the major forerunners of sociological thinking were born. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment produced an unprecedented interest in science and rationality. Instead of resorting to intuition, introspection, tradition, authority and revelation as sources of truth, many philosophers and thinkers embraced a faith in science, which promised to liberate the human being from superstition and fear of the unknown.

Driven by a deep-seated humanitarianism, Enlightenment thinkers attempted to show that the universe was intelligible, that the laws governing its operation could

be discovered and manipulated to the benefit of man. They criticized the divine right of kings to rule, traditional authority and privilege and religion as sources of human bondage. Taking account of the social situation in France during the eighteenth century, the forerunners of sociological thought analysed French social institutions, practices and beliefs with a view to explaining the nature and logic of the human condition. They were convinced that only by constructive social criticism and appeals to rationality could men and women create a more just and equal social order. Their concerns were eminently sociological, and these thinkers helped shape sociological thought down to the present.

But while Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu and Rousseau set the tone for much present-day sociological scholarship, they also provoked a countercurrent that, too, made a significant contribution to the development of the discipline. That countercurrent has been called the romantic and conservative reaction to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment philosophy which followed in its wake. In essence, the romantic-conservatives, also deeply concerned with human behaviour and interaction, disagreed with the heavy emphasis Enlightenment thinking placed upon science and rationality. They argued that significant components of social behaviour were nonrational but nevertheless crucial for analysing social interaction.

Specifically, the romantic-conservatives reacted to the lack of respect for religion, morality and the wisdom of established tradition and custom, and the subjection of imagination, feeling and sentiment to rational ridicule. They cherished the old order and saw progress or change as something that should come about, not via revolution, but through slow and gradual reform. And herein lay their conservatism.

Out of the clash between these two major philosophical orientations, the two founding fathers of sociology forged their seminal ideas. Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and Auguste Comte (1798-1857) blended some tenets of Enlightenment philosophy with certain aspects of romantic-conservative thought to produce a positive science of society — a means for uniting what may otherwise appear to be two opposing currents: order and progress. Their writings deal with some of the concerns that have remained central even in contemporary sociological literature: social class, power, religion, ideology, the family, property, inequality and politics.

These themes were later seized upon by three men who are today regarded as the main pillars of the discipline of sociology: Karl Marx (1818-1883), Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Max Weber (1864-1920).

SOCIOLOGY'S THREE PILLARS — MARX, DURKHEIM AND WEBER

Harbouring a deep-seated humanitarian concern, Marx analysed the operations of the capitalist economic system, which he saw as inherently unjust, dehumanizing and destined to be overthrown. Employing a class analysis, he argued that the capitalist class, whose sole economic motive is the pursuit of profit, exploits the working class to a point where the latter is eventually moved to react violently. From the point of view of the working class, exploitation creates both the objective conditions of misery and the subjective conditions for the developing class consciousness which combine to make the workers revolutionary. The inevitable clash between