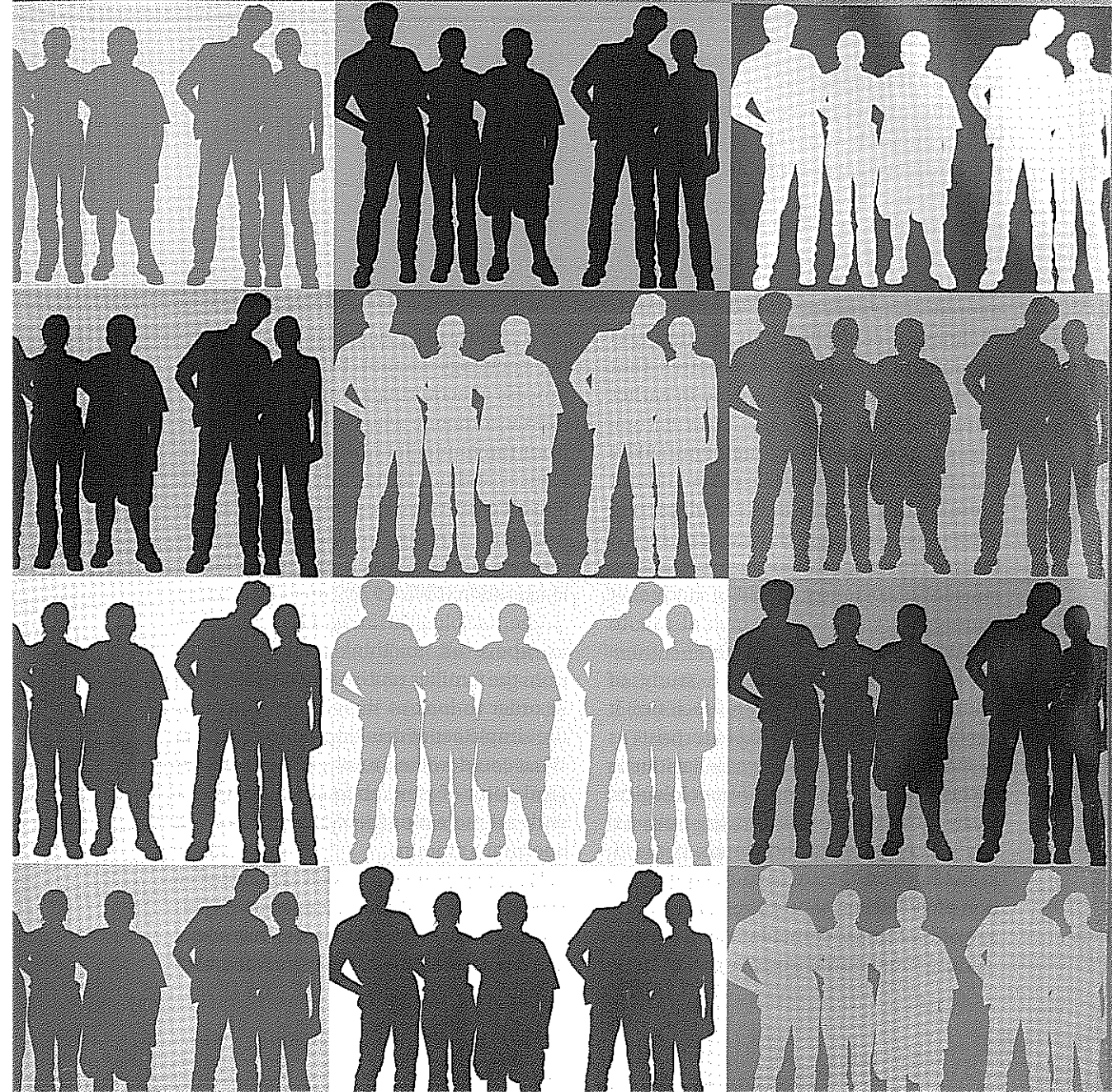
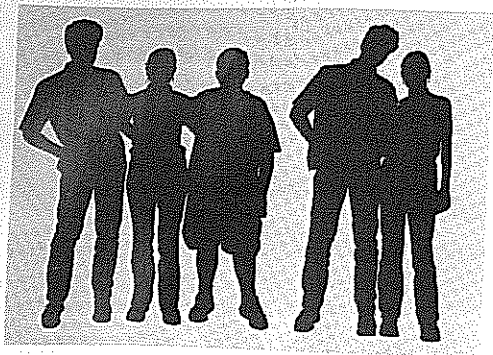


# 1

# What is Sociology?





familiar features of our own lives. Sociology demonstrates the need to take a much broader view of why we are as we are, and why we act as we do. It teaches us that what we regard as natural, inevitable, good or true may not be such, and that the 'givens' of our life are strongly influenced by historical and social forces. Understanding the subtle yet complex and profound ways in which our individual lives reflect the contexts of our social experience is basic to the sociological outlook.

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## The sociological perspective

Learning to think sociologically – looking, in other words, at the broader view – means cultivating the imagination. Studying sociology cannot be just a routine process of acquiring knowledge. A sociologist is someone who is able to break free from the immediacy of personal circumstances and put things in a wider context. Sociological work depends on what the American author C. Wright Mills, in a famous phrase, called the **sociological imagination** (Mills 1970).

The sociological imagination requires us, above all, to 'think ourselves away' from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them anew. Consider the simple act of drinking a cup of coffee. What could we find to say, from a sociological point of view, about such an apparently uninteresting piece of behaviour? An enormous amount.

We could point out first of all that coffee is not just a refreshment. It possesses symbolic value as part of our day-to-day social activities. Often the ritual associated with

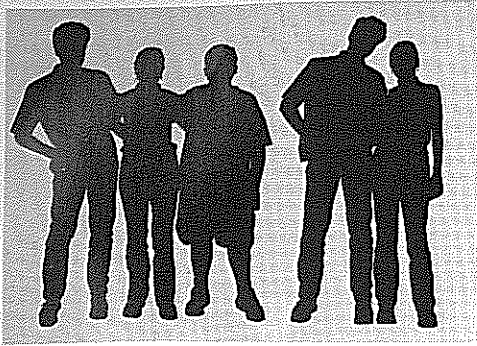
**WE LIVE** today – at the beginning of the twenty-first century – in a world that is intensely worrying, yet full of the most extraordinary promise for the future. It is a world awash with change, marked by deep conflicts, tensions and social divisions, as well as by the destructive onslaught of modern technology on the natural environment. Yet we have possibilities of controlling our destiny and shaping our lives for the better that would have been unimaginable to earlier generations.

How did this world come about? Why are our conditions of life so different from those of our parents and grandparents? What directions will change take in the future? These questions are the prime concern of sociology, a field of study that consequently has a fundamental role to play in modern intellectual life.

**Sociology** is the scientific study of human social life, groups, and societies. It is a dazzling and compelling enterprise, as its subject matter is our own behaviour as social beings. The scope of sociological study is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals on the street to the investigation of global social processes such as the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

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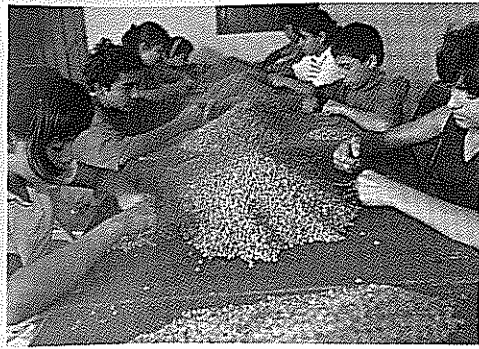
Getting together with friends for coffee is part of a social ritual.

coffee drinking is much more important than the act of consuming the drink itself. For many Westerners the morning cup of coffee stands at the centre of a personal routine. It is an essential first step to starting the day. Morning coffee is often followed later in the day by coffee with others – the basis of a social ritual. Two people who arrange to meet for coffee are probably more interested in getting together and chatting than in what they actually drink. Drinking and eating in all societies, in fact, provide occasions for social interaction and the enactment of rituals – and these offer a rich subject matter for sociological study.

Second, coffee is a drug, containing caffeine, which has a stimulating effect on the brain. Many people drink coffee for the 'extra lift' it provides. Long days at the office

and late nights studying are made more tolerable by coffee breaks. Coffee is a habit-forming substance, but coffee addicts are not regarded by most people in Western culture as drug users. Like alcohol, coffee is a socially acceptable drug, whereas marijuana, for instance, is not. Yet there are societies that tolerate the consumption of marijuana or even cocaine, but frown on both coffee and alcohol. Sociologists are interested in why these contrasts exist.

Third, an individual who drinks a cup of coffee is caught up in a complicated set of social and economic relationships stretching across the world. Coffee is a product which links people in some of the wealthiest and most impoverished parts of the planet: it is consumed in great quantities in wealthy countries, but is grown primarily in poor ones. Next to oil,



Coffee means their livelihood for these workers sorting beans for a fair trade cooperative in South America.

coffee is the most valuable commodity in international trade; it provides many countries with their largest source of foreign exchange. The production, transportation and distribution of coffee require continuous transactions between people thousands of miles away from the coffee drinker. Studying such global transactions is an important task of sociology, since many aspects of our lives are now affected by worldwide social influences and communications.

Fourth, the act of sipping a coffee presumes a whole process of past social and economic development. Along with other now familiar items of Western diets – like tea, bananas, potatoes and white sugar – coffee became widely consumed only from the late 1800s (although coffee was fashionable amongst the elite before then). Although the drink originated in the Middle East, its mass consumption dates from the period of Western expansion about two centuries ago. Virtually all the coffee we drink today comes from areas (South America and Africa) that were colonized by Europeans; it is in no sense a 'natural' part of the Western diet. The



Coffee houses were centres of gossip and political intrigue for the elite in eighteenth-century Britain.

colonial legacy has had an enormous impact on the development of the global coffee trade.

Fifth, coffee is a product that stands at the heart of contemporary debates about globalization, international trade, human rights and environmental destruction. As

coffee has grown in popularity, it has become 'branded' and politicized: the decisions that consumers make about what kind of coffee to drink and where to purchase it have become lifestyle choices. Individuals may choose to drink only organic coffee, decaffeinated coffee or coffee that has been 'fairly traded' (through schemes that pay full market prices to small coffee producers in developing countries). They may opt to patronize 'independent' coffee houses, rather than 'corporate' coffee chains such as Starbucks. Coffee drinkers might decide to boycott coffee from certain countries with poor human rights and environmental records. Sociologists are interested to understand how globalization heightens people's awareness of issues occurring in distant corners of the planet and prompts them to act on new knowledge in their own lives.

### Studying sociology

The sociological imagination allows us to see that many events that seem to concern only the individual actually reflect larger issues. Divorce, for instance, may be a very difficult process for someone who goes through it – what Mills calls a personal trouble. But divorce, he points out, is also a public issue in a society like present-day Britain, where over a third of all marriages break up within ten years. Unemployment, to take another example, may be a personal tragedy for someone thrown out of a job and unable to find another. Yet it goes far beyond a matter for private despair when millions of people in a society are in the same situation: it is a public issue expressing large social trends.

Try applying this sort of outlook to your

own life. It isn't necessary to think only of troubling events. Consider, for instance, why you are turning the pages of this book at all – why you have decided to study sociology. You might be a reluctant sociology student, taking the course only to fulfil a degree requirement. Or you might be enthusiastic to find out more about the subject. Whatever your motivations, you are likely to have a good deal in common, without necessarily knowing it, with others studying sociology. Your private decision reflects your position in the wider society.

Do the following characteristics apply to you? Are you young? White? From a professional or white-collar background? Have you done, or do you still do, some part-time work to boost your income? Do you want to find a good job when you finish your education, but are not especially dedicated to studying? Do you not know really what sociology is but think it has something to do with how people behave in groups? More than three-quarters of you will answer yes to all these questions. University students are not typical of the population as a whole, but tend to be drawn from more privileged backgrounds. And their attitudes usually reflect those held by friends and acquaintances. The social backgrounds from which we come have a great deal to do with what kinds of decisions we think appropriate.

But suppose you answer no to one or more of these questions. You might come from a minority-group background or one of poverty. You may be someone in mid-life or older. All the same, however, further conclusions probably follow. You are likely to have had to struggle to get where you are; you might have had to overcome



hostile reactions from friends and others when you told them you were intending to go to college; or you might be combining higher education with full-time parenthood.

Although we are all influenced by the social contexts in which we find ourselves, none of us is simply determined in our behaviour by those contexts. We possess, and create, our own individuality. It is the business of sociology to investigate the connections between what society makes of us and what we make of ourselves. Our activities both structure – give shape to – the social world around us and at the same time are structured by that social world.

The concept of **social structure** is an important one in sociology. It refers to the fact that the social contexts of our lives do not consist just of random assortments of events or actions; they are structured, or patterned, in distinct ways. There are regularities in the ways we behave and in the relationships we have with one another. But social structure is not like a physical structure, such as a building, which exists independently of human actions. Human societies are always in the process of **structuration**. They are reconstructed at every moment by the very 'building blocks' that compose it – human beings like you and me.

As an example, consider again the case of coffee. A cup of coffee does not automatically arrive in your hands. You choose, for example, to go to a particular coffee shop, whether to drink a latte or an espresso. As you make these decisions, along with millions of other people, you shape the market for coffee and affect the lives of coffee producers living perhaps thousands of miles away on the other side of the world.

## The development of sociological thinking

When they first start studying sociology, many students are puzzled by the diversity of approaches they encounter. Sociology has never been a discipline in which there is a body of ideas that everyone accepts as valid. Sociologists often quarrel amongst themselves about how to go about studying human behaviour and how research results might best be interpreted. Why should this be so? Why can't sociologists agree with one another more consistently, as natural scientists seem able to do? The answer is bound up with the very nature of the field itself. Sociology is about our own lives and our own behaviour, and studying ourselves is the most complex and difficult endeavour we can undertake.

## Theories and theoretical approaches

Trying to understand something as complex as the impact of industrialization on society, for example, raises the importance of theory to sociology. Factual research shows *how* things occur; but sociology does not just consist of collecting facts, however important and interesting they may be (for example, it is a fact that I bought a coffee this morning, that it cost a certain amount, that the coffee beans were grown in Central America, etc.). We also want to know *why* things happen, and in order to do so we have to learn to construct explanatory theories. For instance, we know that industrialization has had a major influence on the emergence of modern societies, but what are the origins and preconditions of



In this painting by Brueghel, there are a large number of people engaged in a range of often bizarre activities. The painting at first seems to make little sense. However, the title of the painting, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, helps explain its meaning. The picture actually shows more than a hundred proverbs that were common when it was painted in the sixteenth century. In the same way, sociologists need theory as a context to help make sense of their observations.

industrialization? Why do we find differences between societies in their industrialization processes? Why is industrialization associated with changes in ways of criminal punishment, or in family and marriage systems? To respond to such questions, we have to develop theoretical thinking.

Theories involve constructing abstract interpretations that can be used to explain a wide variety of empirical situations.

A theory about industrialization, for example, would be concerned with identifying the main features that processes of industrial development share in common and would try to show which of these are most important in explaining such development. Of course, factual research and theories can never completely be separated. We can only develop valid **theoretical approaches** if we are able to test them out by means of factual research.

We need theories to help us make sense of facts. Contrary to popular assertion, facts do not speak for themselves. Many sociologists work primarily on factual research, but unless they are guided by some knowledge of theory, their work is unlikely to explain the complexity of modern societies. This is true even of research carried out with strictly practical objectives.

'Practical people' tend to be suspicious of theorists and may like to see themselves as too 'down to earth' to need to pay attention to more abstract ideas, yet all practical decisions have some theoretical assumptions lying behind them. A manager of a business, for example, might have scant regard for 'theory'. Nonetheless, every approach to business activity involves theoretical assumptions, even if these often remain unstated. Thus, the manager might assume that employees are motivated to work hard mainly by money – the level of wages they receive. This is not only a theoretical interpretation of human behaviour; it is also a mistaken one, as research in industrial sociology tends to demonstrate.

Without a theoretical approach, we would not know what to look for in beginning a study or in interpreting the results of research. However, the illumination of factual evidence is not the only reason for the prime position of theory in sociology. Theoretical thinking must respond to general problems posed by the study of human social life, including issues that are philosophical in nature. Deciding the extent to which sociology should be modelled on the natural sciences and how we should best conceptualize human consciousness, action and institutions are problems that do not have easy solutions.

They have been handled in different ways in the various theoretical approaches that have sprung up in the discipline.

### Early theorists

We human beings have always been curious about the sources of our own behaviour, but for thousands of years our attempts to understand ourselves relied on ways of thinking passed down from generation to generation, often expressed in religious terms. (For example, before the rise of modern science, many people believed that gods or spirits were the cause of natural events such as earthquakes.) Although writers from earlier periods provided insights into human behaviour and society, the systematic study of society is a relatively recent development, whose beginnings date back to the late 1700s and early 1800s. The background to the origins of sociology was the series of sweeping changes ushered in by the French Revolution of 1789 and the emergence of the **Industrial Revolution** in Europe. The shattering of traditional ways of life wrought by these changes resulted in the attempts of thinkers to develop a new understanding of both the social and natural worlds.

A key development was the use of science instead of religion to understand the world. The types of questions these nineteenth-century thinkers sought to answer – What is human nature? Why is society structured like it is? How and why do societies change? – are the same questions sociologists try to answer today. Our modern world is radically different from that of the past; it is sociology's task to help us understand this world and what the future is likely to hold.

### Auguste Comte

No single individual, of course, can found a whole field of study, and there were many contributors to early sociological thinking. Particular prominence, however, is usually given to the French author Auguste Comte (1798–1857), if only because he actually invented the word 'sociology'. Comte originally used the term 'social physics', but some of his intellectual rivals at the time were also making use of that term. Comte wanted to distinguish his own views from theirs, so he coined the term 'sociology' to describe the subject he wished to establish.

Comte's thinking reflected the turbulent events of his age. The French Revolution had introduced significant changes into society and the growth of industrialization was altering the traditional lives of the French population. Comte sought to create a science of society that could



Auguste Comte (1798–1857)

explain the laws of the social world just as natural science explained the functioning of the physical world. Although Comte recognized that each scientific discipline has its own subject matter, he believed that they all share a common logic and scientific method aimed at revealing universal laws. Just as the discovery of laws in the natural world allows us to control and predict events around us, uncovering the laws that govern human society could help us shape our destiny and improve the welfare of humanity. Comte argued that society conforms to invariable laws in much the same way that the physical world does.

Comte's vision for sociology was that of a *positive* science. He believed that sociology should apply the same rigorous scientific methods to the study of society that physics or chemistry use to study the physical world. **Positivism** holds that science should be concerned only with observable entities that are known directly to experience. On the basis of careful sensory observations, one can infer laws that explain the relationship between the observed phenomena. By understanding the causal relationship between events, scientists can then predict how future events will occur. A positivist approach to sociology believes in the production of knowledge about society based on empirical evidence drawn from observation, comparison and experimentation.

Comte's *law of the three stages* claims that human efforts to understand the world have passed through theological, metaphysical and positive stages. In the theological stage, thoughts were guided by religious ideas and the belief that society was an expression of God's will. In the metaphysical stage, which came to the

forefront around the time of the Renaissance, society came to be seen in natural, not supernatural, terms. The positive stage, ushered in by the discoveries and achievements of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, encouraged the application of scientific techniques to the social world. In keeping with this view, Comte regarded sociology as the last science to develop – following on from physics, chemistry and biology – but as the most significant and complex of all the sciences.

In the later part of his career, Comte drew up ambitious plans for the reconstruction of French society in particular and for human societies in general, based on his sociological viewpoint. He urged the establishment of a 'religion of humanity' that would abandon faith and dogma in favour of a scientific grounding. Sociology would be at the heart of this new religion. Comte was keenly aware of the state of the society in which he lived; he was concerned with the inequalities being produced by industrialization and the threat they posed to social cohesion. The long-term solution, in his view, was the production of a moral consensus that would help to regulate, or hold together, society despite the new patterns of inequality. Although Comte's vision for the reconstruction of society was never realized, his contribution to systematizing and unifying the science of society was important to the later professionalization of sociology as an academic discipline.

### Emile Durkheim

The writings of another French author, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), have had a more lasting impact on modern sociology than those of Comte. Although he drew on



Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

aspects of Comte's work, Durkheim thought that many of his predecessor's ideas were too speculative and vague and that Comte had not successfully carried out his programme – to establish sociology on a scientific basis. Durkheim saw sociology as a new science that could be used to elucidate traditional philosophical questions by examining them in an empirical manner. Like Comte before him, Durkheim believed that we must study social life with the same objectivity as scientists study the natural world. His famous first principle of sociology was 'Study social facts as *things!*' By this he meant that social life could be analysed as rigorously as objects or events in nature.

Durkheim's writings spanned a broad spectrum of topics. Three of the main

themes he addressed were the importance of sociology as an empirical science, the rise of the individual and the formation of a new social order, and the sources and character of moral authority in society. We will encounter Durkheim's ideas again in our discussions of religion, deviance and crime, and work and economic life.

For Durkheim, the main intellectual concern of sociology is the study of **social facts**. Rather than applying sociological methods to the study of individuals, sociologists should instead examine social facts – aspects of social life that shape our actions as individuals, such as the state of the economy or the influence of religion. Durkheim believed that societies have a reality of their own – that is to say that there is more to society than simply the actions and interests of its individual members. According to Durkheim, social facts are ways of acting, thinking or feeling that are *external* to individuals and have their own reality outside the lives and perceptions of individual people. Another attribute of social facts is that they exercise a *coercive power* over individuals. The constraining nature of social facts is often not recognized by people as coercive, however. This is because people generally comply with social facts freely, believing they are acting out of choice. In fact, Durkheim argues, people often simply follow patterns that are general to their society. Social facts can constrain human action in a variety of ways, ranging from outright punishment (in the case of a crime, for example) to social rejection (in the case of unacceptable behaviour) to simple misunderstanding (in the case of the misuse of language).

Durkheim conceded that social facts are difficult to study. Because they are

invisible and intangible, social facts cannot be observed directly. Instead, their properties must be revealed indirectly by analysing their effects or by considering attempts that have been made at their expression, such as laws, religious texts or written rules of conduct. In studying social facts, Durkheim stressed the importance of abandoning prejudices and ideology. A scientific attitude demands a mind which is open to the evidence of the senses and free of preconceived ideas which come from outside. Durkheim held that scientific concepts could only be generated through scientific practice. He challenged sociologists to study things as they really are and to construct new concepts that reflect the true nature of social things.

Like the other founders of sociology, Durkheim was preoccupied with the changes transforming society in his own lifetime. He was particularly interested in social and moral solidarity – in other words, what holds society together and keeps it from descending into chaos. Solidarity is maintained when individuals are successfully integrated into social groups and are regulated by a set of shared values and customs. In his first major work, *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim presented an analysis of social change that argued that the advent of the industrial era meant the emergence of a new type of solidarity (Durkheim 1984 [1893]). In making this argument, Durkheim contrasted two types of solidarity, *mechanical* and *organic*, and related them to the **division of labour** – the growth of distinctions between different occupations.

According to Durkheim, traditional cultures with a low division of labour are characterized by mechanical solidarity.



Because most members of the society are involved in similar occupations, they are bound together by common experience and shared beliefs. The strength of these shared beliefs is repressive – the community swiftly punishes anyone who challenges conventional ways of life. In this way, there is little room for individual dissent. Mechanical solidarity, therefore, is grounded in consensus and similarity of belief. The forces of industrialization and urbanization, however, led to a growing division of labour that contributed to the breakdown of this form of solidarity. Durkheim argued that the specialization of tasks and the increasing social differentiation in advanced societies would lead to a new order featuring organic solidarity. Societies characterized by organic solidarity are held together by people's economic interdependence and their recognition of the importance of others' contributions. As the division of labour expands, people become increasingly dependent upon one another, because each person needs goods and services that those in other occupations supply. Relationships of economic reciprocity and mutual dependency come to replace shared beliefs in creating social consensus.

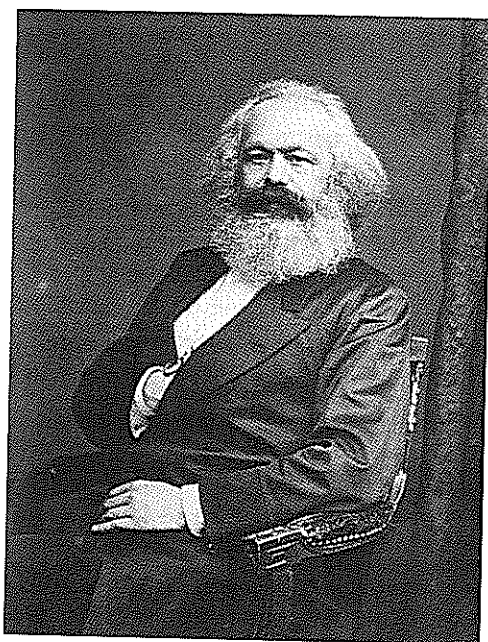
Yet, processes of change in the modern world are so rapid and intense that they give rise to major social difficulties. They can have disruptive effects on traditional lifestyles, morals, religious beliefs and everyday patterns without providing clear new values. Durkheim linked these unsettling conditions to *anomie*, a feeling of aimlessness or despair provoked by modern social life. Traditional moral controls and standards, which used to be supplied by religion, are largely broken down by modern social development, and this

leaves many individuals in modern societies feeling that their daily lives lack meaning.

One of Durkheim's most famous studies was concerned with the analysis of suicide (see box). Suicide seems to be a purely personal act, the outcome of extreme personal unhappiness. Durkheim showed, however, that social factors exert a fundamental influence on suicidal behaviour – *anomie* being one of these influences. Suicide rates show regular patterns from year to year and these patterns must be explained sociologically.

### Karl Marx

The ideas of Karl Marx (1818–83) contrast sharply with those of Comte and Durkheim, but, like them, he sought to explain the changes that were taking place in society during the time of the Industrial Revolution. Marx's political activities brought him as a young man into conflict



Karl Marx (1818–83)

### Durkheim's study of suicide

One of the classic sociological studies to explore the relationship between the individual and society is Emile Durkheim's analysis of suicide (Durkheim 1952 [1897]). Even though humans see themselves as individuals exercising free will and choice, their behaviours are often socially patterned and shaped. Durkheim's study showed that even a highly personal act like suicide is influenced by the social world.

Research had been conducted on suicide prior to Durkheim's study, but he was the first to insist on a sociological explanation for suicide. Previous writings had acknowledged the influence of social factors on suicide, but looked to considerations such as race, climate or mental disorder to explain an individual's likelihood of committing suicide. According to Durkheim, however, suicide was a *social fact* that could only be explained by other social facts. Suicide was more than simply the aggregate of individual acts – it was a phenomenon that bore patterned properties.

In examining official suicide records in France, Durkheim found that certain categories of people were more likely to commit suicide than others. He discovered, for example, that there were more suicides among men than women, among Protestants as opposed to Catholics, among the wealthy compared to the poor, and among single over married people. Durkheim also noted that suicide rates tended to be lower during times of war and higher during times of economic change or instability.

These findings led Durkheim to conclude that there are social forces external to the individual which affect suicide rates. He related his explanation to the idea of social solidarity and to two types of bonds within society – *social integration* and *social regulation*. Durkheim believed that people who were integrated strongly into social groups, and whose desires and aspirations were regulated by social norms, were less likely to commit suicide. He identified four types of suicide, in accordance with the relative presence or absence of integration and regulation.

*Egoistic* suicides are marked by low integration in society and occur when an individual is isolated, or when his or her ties to a group are weakened or broken. For example, the low rates of suicide among Catholics might

be explained by their strong social community, while the personal and moral freedom of Protestants mean that they 'stand alone' before God. Marriage protects against suicide by integrating the individual into a stable social relationship, while single people remain more isolated within society. The lower suicide rate during wartime, according to Durkheim, can be seen as a sign of heightened social integration.

*Anomic* suicide is caused by a lack of social regulation. By this, Durkheim referred to the social conditions of *anomie* when people are rendered 'normless' due to rapid change or instability in society. The loss of a fixed point of reference for norms and desires – such as in times of economic upheaval or in personal struggles like divorce – can upset the balance between people's circumstances and their desires.

*Altruistic* suicide occurs when an individual is 'over-integrated' – social bonds are too strong – and values society more than himself or herself. In such a case, suicide becomes a sacrifice for the 'greater good'. Japanese kamikaze pilots or Islamic 'suicide bombers' are examples of altruistic suicides. Durkheim saw these as characteristic of traditional societies where mechanical solidarity prevails.

The final type of suicide is *fatalistic* suicide. Although Durkheim saw this as of little contemporary relevance, he believed that it results when an individual is over-regulated by society. The oppression of the individual results in a feeling of powerlessness before fate or society.

Suicide rates vary between societies but show regular patterns within societies over time. Durkheim took this as evidence that there are consistent social forces that influence suicide rates. An examination of suicide rates reveals how general social patterns can be detected within individual actions.

Since the publication of *Suicide*, many objections have been raised to the study, particularly about Durkheim's use of official statistics, his dismissal of non-social influences on suicide, and his insistence on classifying all types of suicide together. Nonetheless, the study remains a classic and his fundamental assertion remains: even the seemingly personal act of suicide demands a sociological explanation.



with the German authorities; after a brief stay in France, he settled permanently in exile in Britain. Marx witnessed the growth of factories and industrial production, as well as the inequalities that resulted. His interest in the European labour movement and socialist ideas were reflected in his writings, which covered a diversity of topics. Most of his work concentrated on economic issues, but since he was always concerned to connect economic problems to social institutions, his work was, and is, rich in sociological insights. Even his sternest critics regard his work as important for the development of sociology.

#### Capitalism and class struggle

Though he wrote about various phases of history, Marx concentrated primarily on change in modern times. For him, the most important changes were bound up with the development of **capitalism**. Capitalism is a system of production that contrasts radically with previous economic systems in history, involving as it does the production of goods and services sold to a wide range of consumers. Marx identified two main elements within capitalist enterprises. The first is *capital* – any asset, including money, machines or even factories, which can be used or invested to make future assets. The accumulation of capital goes hand in hand with the second element, *wage-labour*. Wage-labour refers to the pool of workers who do not own the means of their livelihood but must find employment provided by the owners of capital. Marx believed that those who own capital – **capitalists** – form a ruling class, while the mass of the population make up a class of waged workers, or a working class. As industrialization spread, large

numbers of peasants who used to support themselves by working the land moved to the expanding cities and helped to form an urban-based industrial working class. This working class is also referred to as the **proletariat**.

According to Marx, capitalism is inherently a **class** system in which class relations are characterized by conflict. Although owners of capital and workers are each dependent on the other – the capitalists need labour and the workers need wages – the dependency is highly unbalanced. The relationship between classes is an exploitative one, since workers have little or no control over their labour and employers are able to generate profit by appropriating the product of workers' labour. Marx believed that class conflict over economic resources would become more acute with the passing of time.

#### Social change: the materialist conception of history

Marx's viewpoint was grounded in what he called the **materialist conception of history**. According to this view, it is not the ideas or values which human beings hold that are the main sources of social change. Rather, social change is prompted primarily by economic influences. Conflicts between classes provide the motivation for historical development – they are the 'motor of history'. As Marx wrote at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx and Engels 2001 [1848]). Although Marx focused most of his attention on capitalism and modern society, he also examined how societies had developed over the course of history. According to him, social

systems make a transition from one mode of production to another – sometimes gradually and sometimes through revolution – as a result of contradictions in their economies. He outlined a progression of historical stages that began with primitive communist societies of hunters and gatherers and passed through ancient slave-owning systems and feudal systems based on the division between landowners and serfs. The emergence of merchants and craftspeople marked the beginning of a commercial or capitalist class that came to displace the landed nobility. In accordance with this view of history, Marx argued that just as the capitalists had united to overthrow the feudal order, so too would the capitalists be supplanted and a new order installed: **communism**.

Marx believed in the inevitability of a workers' revolution which would overthrow the capitalist system and usher in a new society in which there would be no classes – no large-scale divisions between rich and poor. He didn't mean that all inequalities between individuals would disappear. Rather, society would no longer be split into a small class that monopolizes economic and political power and the large mass of people who benefit little from the wealth their work creates. The economic system would come under communal ownership, and a more humane society than we know at present would be established. Marx believed that in the society of the future, production would be more advanced and efficient than production under capitalism.

Marx's work had a far-reaching effect on the twentieth-century world. Until less than two decades ago, more than a third of the earth's population lived in societies, such as the Soviet Union and the countries

of Eastern Europe, whose governments claimed to derive their inspiration from Marx's ideas.

#### Max Weber

Like Marx, Max Weber (pronounced 'veybur') (1864–1920) cannot simply be labelled a sociologist; his interests and concerns ranged across many areas. Born in Germany, where he spent most of his academic career, Weber was an individual of wide learning. His writings covered the fields of economics, law, philosophy and comparative history as well as sociology. Much of his work was also concerned with the development of modern capitalism and the ways in which modern society was different from earlier forms of social organization. Through a series of empirical studies, Weber set forth some of the basic characteristics of modern industrial societies and identified key sociological



Max Weber (1864–1920)

debates that remain central for sociologists today.

In common with other thinkers of his time, Weber sought to understand the nature and causes of social change. He was influenced by Marx but also was strongly critical of some of Marx's major views. He rejected the materialist conception of history and saw class conflict as less significant than did Marx. In Weber's view, economic factors are important, but ideas and values have just as much impact on social change. Weber's celebrated and much discussed work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976), proposes that religious values – especially those associated with Puritanism – were of fundamental importance in creating a capitalistic outlook. Unlike other early sociological thinkers, Weber believed that sociology should focus on *social action*, not structures. He argued that human motivation and ideas were the forces behind change – ideas, values and beliefs had the power to bring about transformations. According to Weber, individuals have the ability to act freely and to shape the future. He did not believe, as Durkheim and Marx did, that structures existed external to or independent of individuals. Rather, structures in society were formed by a complex interplay of actions. It was the job of sociology to understand the meanings behind those actions.

Some of Weber's most influential writings reflected this concern with social action in analysing the distinctiveness of Western society as compared with other major civilizations. He studied the religions of China, India and the Near East, and in the course of these researches made major contributions to the sociology of religion. Comparing the leading religious

systems in China and India with those of the West, Weber concluded that certain aspects of Christian beliefs strongly influenced the rise of capitalism. He argued that the capitalist outlook of Western societies did not emerge, as Marx supposed, only from economic changes. In Weber's view, cultural ideas and values help shape society and our individual actions.

An important element in Weber's sociological perspective was the idea of the **ideal type**. Ideal types are conceptual or analytical models that can be used to understand the world. In the real world, ideal types rarely, if ever, exist – often only some of their attributes will be present. These hypothetical constructions can be very useful, however, as any situation in the real world can be understood by comparing it to an ideal type. In this way, ideal types serve as a fixed point of reference. It is important to point out that by 'ideal' type Weber did not mean that the conception was a perfect or desirable goal. Instead, he meant that it was a 'pure' form of a certain phenomenon. Weber utilized ideal types in his writings on forms of bureaucracy and the market.

#### Rationalization

In Weber's view, the emergence of modern society was accompanied by important shifts in patterns of social action. He believed that people were moving away from traditional beliefs grounded in superstition, religion, custom and long-standing habit. Instead, individuals were increasingly engaging in rational, instrumental calculations that took into account efficiency and future consequences. In industrial society, there was little room for sentiments and for doing things simply because they had been done that way for

#### Modern theoretical approaches

The early sociologists were united in their desire to make sense of the changing societies in which they lived. They wanted to do more than simply depict and interpret the momentous events of their time, however. More importantly, they sought to develop ways of studying the social world that could explain the functioning of societies in general and the nature of social change. Yet, as we have seen, Durkheim, Marx and Weber employed very different approaches in their studies of the social world. For example, where Durkheim and Marx focused on the strength of forces external to the individual, Weber took as his point of departure the ability of individuals to act creatively on the outside world. Where Marx pointed to the predominance of economic issues, Weber considered a much wider range of factors to be significant. Such differences in approach have persisted throughout the history of sociology. Even when sociologists agree on the subject of analysis, they often undertake that analysis from different theoretical perspectives.

The three recent theoretical approaches examined below – functionalism, the conflict approach and symbolic interactionism – have connections with Durkheim, Marx and Weber respectively. Throughout this book, you will encounter arguments and ideas that draw upon and illustrate these theoretical approaches.

In chapter 4 we return to the major theoretical approaches to sociology in more detail and examine some of the more recent theoretical developments in sociological thought.

generations. The development of science, modern technology and bureaucracy was described by Weber collectively as **rationalization** – the organization of social and economic life according to the principles of efficiency and on the basis of technical knowledge. If in traditional societies, religion and long-standing customs largely defined people's attitudes and values, modern society was marked by the rationalization of more and more areas of life, from politics to religion to economic activity.

In Weber's view, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism were proof of a larger trend towards rationalization. Capitalism is not dominated by class conflict, as Marx believed, but by the rise of *science* and *bureaucracy* – large-scale organizations (for more on bureaucracy see pp. 638–46). Weber saw the scientific character of the West as one of its most distinctive traits. Bureaucracy, the only way of organizing large numbers of people effectively, expands with economic and political growth. Weber used the term *disenchantment* to describe the way in which scientific thinking in the modern world had swept away the forces of sentimentality from the past.

Weber was not entirely optimistic about the outcome of rationalization, however. He was fearful of modern society as a system that would crush the human spirit by attempting to regulate all spheres of social life. He was particularly troubled by the potentially suffocating and dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy and its implications for the fate of **democracy**. The agenda of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, of advancing progress, wealth and happiness by rejecting custom and superstition in favour of science and technology, produced dangers of its own.



**A neglected founder**

Although Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber are, without doubt, foundational figures in sociology, there were other important thinkers from the same period whose contributions must also be taken into account. Sociology, like many academic fields, has not always lived up to its ideal of acknowledging the importance of every thinker whose work has intrinsic merit. Very few women or members of racial minorities were given the opportunity to become professional sociologists during the 'classical' period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, the few that were given the opportunity to do sociological research of lasting importance have frequently been neglected by the field. Individuals like Harriet Martineau deserve the attention of sociologists today.

**Harriet Martineau**

Harriet Martineau (1802–76) has been called the 'first woman sociologist', but, like Marx and Weber, cannot be thought of simply as a sociologist. She was born and educated in England and was the author of more than fifty books, as well as numerous essays. Martineau is now credited with introducing sociology to Britain through her translation of Comte's founding treatise of the field, *Positive Philosophy* (Rossi 1973). In addition, Martineau conducted a first-hand systematic study of American society during her extensive travels throughout the United States in the 1830s, which is the subject of her book *Society in America* (1962 [1837]). Martineau is significant to sociologists today for several reasons. First, she argued that when one studies a society, one must focus on all its aspects, including key political, religious and social institutions. Second, she insisted that an analysis of a society must include an

understanding of women's lives. Third, she was the first to turn a sociological eye on previously ignored issues, including marriage, children, domestic and religious life, and race relations. As she once wrote, 'The nursery, the boudoir, and the kitchen are all excellent schools in which to learn the morals and manners of a people' (1962 [1837]). Finally, she argued that sociologists should do more than just observe; they should also act in ways to benefit a society. As a result, Martineau was an active proponent of both women's rights and the emancipation of slaves.



Harriet Martineau (1802–76)

**Functionalism**

Functionalism holds that society is a complex system whose various parts work together to produce stability and solidarity. According to this approach, the disci-

pline of sociology should investigate the relationship of parts of society to each other and to society as a whole. We can analyse the religious beliefs and customs of a society, for example, by showing how

they relate to other institutions within it, for the different parts of a society develop in close relation to one another.

To study the function of a social practice or institution is to analyse the contribution which that practice, or institution, makes to the continuation of society. Functionalists, including Comte and Durkheim, have often used an *organic analogy* to compare the operation of society to that of a living organism. They argue that the parts of society work together, just as the various parts of the human body do, for the benefit of society as a whole. To study a bodily organ like the heart, we need to show how it relates to other parts of the body. By pumping blood around the body, the heart plays a vital role in the continuation of the life of the organism. Similarly, analysing the function of a social item means showing the part it plays in the continued existence and health of a society.

Functionalism emphasizes the importance of moral consensus, in maintaining order and stability in society. Moral consensus exists when most people in a society share the same values. Functionalists regard order and balance as the normal state of society – this social equilibrium is grounded in the existence of a moral consensus among the members of society. For instance, Durkheim believed that religion reaffirms people's adherence to core social values, thereby contributing to the maintenance of social cohesion.

Until the 1960s, functionalist thought was probably the leading theoretical tradition in sociology, particularly in the United States. Talcott Parsons (1902–79) and Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), who each drew extensively on Durkheim, were two of its most prominent adherents.

Merton's version of functionalism has been particularly influential. Merton distinguished between manifest and latent functions. *Manifest functions* are those known to, and intended by, the participants in a specific type of social activity. *Latent functions* are consequences of that activity of which participants are unaware. To illustrate this distinction, Merton used the example of a rain dance performed by the Hopi Tribe of Arizona and New Mexico. The Hopi believe that the ceremony will bring the rain they need for their crops (manifest function). This is why they organize and participate in it. But the rain dance, Merton argued, using Durkheim's theory of religion, also has the effect of promoting the cohesion of the Hopi society (latent function). A major part of sociological explanation, according to Merton, consists in uncovering the latent functions of social activities and institutions.

Merton also distinguished between functions and *dysfunctions*. To look for the dysfunctional aspects of social behaviour means focusing on features of social life that challenge the existing order of things. For example, it is mistaken to suppose that religion is always functional – that it contributes only to social cohesion. When two groups support different religions or even different versions of the same religion, the result can be major social conflicts, causing widespread social disruption. Thus, wars have often been fought between religious communities – as can be seen in the struggles between Protestants and Catholics in European history.

In recent years, the popularity of functionalism has begun to wane, as its limitations have become apparent. While this

was not true of Merton, many functionalist thinkers (Talcott Parsons is an example) unduly stressed factors leading to social cohesion at the expense of those producing division and conflict. The focus on stability and order means that divisions or inequalities in society – based on factors such as class, race and gender – are minimized. There is also less emphasis on the role of creative social action within society. Many critics have argued that functional analysis attributes to societies social qualities that they do not have. Functionalists often wrote as though societies have ‘needs’ and ‘purposes’, even though these concepts make sense only when applied to individual human beings.

### *Conflict perspectives*

Like functionalists, sociologists employing **conflict theories** emphasize the importance of structures within society. They also advance a comprehensive ‘model’ to explain how society works. However, conflict theorists reject functionalism’s emphasis on consensus. Instead, they highlight the importance of divisions in society. In doing so, they concentrate on issues of power, inequality and struggle. They tend to see society as composed of distinct groups pursuing their own interests. The existence of separate interests means that the potential for conflict is always present and that certain groups will benefit more than others. Conflict theorists examine the tensions between dominant and disadvantaged groups within society and seek to understand how relationships of control are established and perpetuated.

An influential approach within conflict theory is Marxism, named after Karl Marx, whose work emphasized class conflict.

Numerous interpretations of Marx’s major ideas are possible, and there are today schools of Marxist thought that take very different theoretical positions. In all of its versions, Marxism differs from most other traditions of sociology in that its authors see it as a combination of sociological analysis and political reform. Marxism is supposed to generate a programme of radical political change.

However, not all conflict theories take a Marxist approach. Some conflict theorists have also been influenced by Weber. A good example is the contemporary German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–). In his now classic work, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), Dahrendorf argues that functionalist thinkers only consider one side of society – those aspects of social life where there is harmony and agreement. Just as important, or more so, are areas marked by conflict and division. Conflict, Dahrendorf says, comes mainly from different interests that individuals and groups have. Marx saw differences of interest mainly in terms of classes, but Dahrendorf relates them more broadly to authority and power. In all societies there is a division between those who hold authority and those who are largely excluded from it – between rulers and ruled.

### *Symbolic interactionism*

The work of the American philosopher G. H. Mead (1863–1931) had an important influence on sociological thought, in particular through a perspective called **symbolic interactionism**. Symbolic interactionism springs from a concern with language and meaning. Mead claims that language allows us to become self-conscious beings – aware of our own individ-

uality, and able to see ourselves from the outside as others see us. The key element in this process is the **symbol**. A symbol is something that stands for something else. For example, words that we use to refer to certain objects are in fact symbols which represent what we mean. The word ‘spoon’ is the symbol we use to describe the utensil that we use to eat soup. Non-verbal gestures or forms of communication are also symbols. Waving at someone or making a rude gesture has symbolic value. Mead argued that humans rely on shared symbols and understandings in their interactions with one another. Because human beings live in a richly symbolic universe, virtually all interactions between human individuals involve an exchange of symbols.

Symbolic interactionism directs our attention to the detail of interpersonal interaction, and how that detail is used to make sense of what others say and do. Sociologists influenced by symbolic interactionism often focus on face-to-face interaction in the contexts of everyday life. They stress the role of such interaction in creating society and its institutions. Max Weber was an important indirect influence on this theoretical approach because, although he acknowledged the existence of social structures – such as classes, parties, status groups and others – he held that these structures were created through the *social actions* of individuals.

While the symbolic interactionist perspective can yield many insights into the nature of our actions in the course of day-to-day social life, it has been criticized for ignoring the larger issues of power and structure within society and how they serve to constrain individual action.

One classic example of symbolic inter-

actionism that does take into account the issues of power and structure in our society is Arlie Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983). Hochschild, a sociology professor at the University of California, observed training sessions and carried out interviews at Delta Airlines’ Stewardess Training Centre in Atlanta in the USA. She watched flight attendants being trained to manage their feelings as well as learning other skills. Hochschild recalled the comments of one instructor, a pilot, at the training sessions: ‘Now girls, I want you to go out there and really smile’, the pilot instructed. ‘Your smile is your biggest asset. I want you to go out there and use it. Smile. Really smile. Really lay it on.’

Through her observations and interviews Hochschild found that as Western economies have become increasingly based on the delivery of services, the emotional style of the work we do needs to be understood. Hochschild’s study of ‘customer service’ training amongst flight attendants might feel familiar to anyone who has worked in the service industry before, perhaps in a shop, restaurant or bar. Hochschild calls this training in ‘emotional labour’ – labour that requires that one manages one’s feelings in order to create a publicly observable (and acceptable) facial and body display. According to Hochschild, the companies you work for lay claim not only to your physical movements, but also to your emotions. They own your smile when you are working.

Hochschild’s research opened a window on an aspect of life that most people think they understand, but which needed to be understood at a deeper level. She found that service workers – like physical labourers – often feel a sense of distance from the



particular aspect of themselves that is given up in work. The physical labourer's arm, for example, might come to feel like a piece of machinery, and only incidentally a part of the person moving it. Likewise, service workers often told Hochschild that their smiles were on them but not of them. In other words, these workers felt a sense of distance from their own emotions. This is interesting when we consider the fact that emotions are usually thought of as a deep and personal part of ourselves.

Hochschild's book is an influential application of symbolic interactionism and many other scholars have built on her ideas since *The Managed Heart* was first published. Although she conducted her research within one of the world's most developed 'service economies' – the United States – Hochschild's findings are applicable to many societies in the present age. Service jobs are expanding rapidly in countries around the world, demanding that more and more people engage in 'emotional labour' at the workplace. In some cultures, such as amongst the Inuit of Greenland, where there isn't the same tradition of public smiling as there is in Western Europe and North America, training in emotional labour has proved to be a somewhat difficult task. In these countries, employees in service jobs are sometimes required to take part in special 'smiling training sessions' – not so different from the ones attended by Delta Airlines stewardesses.

### Theoretical thinking in sociology

So far in this chapter we have been concerned with theoretical approaches, which refer to broad, overall orientations to the subject matter of sociology.

However, we can draw a distinction between the *theoretical approaches* discussed above and *theories*. Theories are more narrowly focused and represent attempts to explain particular social conditions or types of event. They are usually formed as part of the process of research and in turn suggest problems to which research investigations should be devoted. An example would be Durkheim's theory of suicide, referred to earlier in this chapter.

Innumerable theories have been developed in the many different areas of research in which sociologists work. Sometimes theories are very precisely set out and are even occasionally expressed in mathematical form – although this is more common in other social sciences (especially economics) than in sociology.

Some theories are also much more encompassing than others. Opinions vary about whether it is desirable or useful for sociologists to concern themselves with very wide-ranging theoretical endeavours. Robert K. Merton (1957), for example, argues forcefully that sociologists should concentrate their attention on what he calls *theories of the middle range*. Rather than attempting to create grand theoretical schemes (in the manner of Marx, for instance), we should be concerned with developing theories that are more modest.

Middle-range theories are specific enough to be directly tested by empirical research, yet sufficiently general to cover a range of different phenomena. A case in point is the theory of *relative deprivation*. This theory holds that the way people evaluate their circumstances depends on whom they compare themselves to. Thus, feelings of deprivation do not conform

directly to the level of material poverty that people experience. A family living in a small home in a poor area, where everyone is in more or less similar circumstances, is likely to feel less deprived than a family living in a similar house in a neighbourhood where the majority of the other homes are much larger and the other people more affluent.

It is indeed true that the more wide-ranging and ambitious a theory is, the more difficult it is to test empirically. Yet, there seems no obvious reason why theoretical thinking in sociology should be confined to the 'middle range'.

Assessing theories, and especially theoretical approaches, in sociology is a challenging and formidable task. Theoretical debates are by definition more abstract than controversies of a more empirical kind. The fact that sociology is not dominated by a single theoretical approach might seem to be a sign of weakness in the subject, but this is not the case. The jostling of rival theoretical approaches and theories is an expression of the vitality of the sociological enterprise. In studying human beings – ourselves – theoretical variety rescues us from dogma. Human behaviour is complicated and many-sided, and it is very unlikely that a single theoretical perspective could cover all of its aspects. Diversity in theoretical thinking provides a rich source of ideas that can be drawn on in research and which stimulates the imaginative capacities so essential to progress in sociological work.

### Levels of analysis: microsociology and macrosociology

One important distinction between the different theoretical perspectives we have

discussed in this chapter involves the level of analysis each is directed at. The study of everyday behaviour in situations of face-to-face interaction is usually called *microsociology*. *Macrosociology* is the analysis of large-scale social systems, like the political system or the economic order. It also includes the analysis of long-term processes of change, such as the development of industrialism. At first glance, it might seem as though micro-analysis and macro-analysis are distinct from one another. In fact, the two are closely connected (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Giddens 1984).

Macro-analysis is essential if we are to understand the institutional background of daily life. The ways in which people live their everyday lives are greatly affected by the broader institutional framework, as is obvious when the daily cycle of activities of a culture like that of the medieval period is compared with life in an industrialized urban environment. In modern societies, we are constantly in contact with strangers. This contact may be indirect and impersonal. However, no matter how many indirect or electronic relations we enter into today, even in the most complex societies, the presence of other people remains crucial. While we may choose just to send an acquaintance an email message, we can also choose to fly thousands of miles to spend the weekend with a friend.

Micro-studies are in turn necessary for illuminating broad institutional patterns. Face-to-face interaction is clearly the main basis of all forms of social organization, no matter how large scale. Suppose we are studying a business corporation. We could understand much about its activities simply by looking at face-to-face

behaviour. We could analyse, for example, the interaction of directors in the boardroom, people working in the various offices, or the workers on the factory floor. We would not build up a picture of the whole corporation in this way, since some of its business is transacted through printed materials, letters, the telephone and computers. Yet we could certainly contribute significantly to understanding how the organization works.

In later chapters, we will see further examples of how interaction in micro-contexts affects larger social processes, and how macro-systems in turn influence more confined settings of social life.

### How can sociology help us in our lives?

Sociology has several practical implications for our lives, as C. Wright Mills emphasized when developing his idea of the sociological imagination, discussed above (p. 4). First, sociology gives us an awareness of cultural differences that allows us to see the social world from many perspectives. Quite often, if we properly understand how others live, we also acquire a better understanding of what their problems are. Practical policies that are not based on an informed awareness of the ways of life of people they affect have little chance of success. For example, a white social worker operating in a predominantly Latin American community in South London won't gain the confidence of its members without developing a sensitivity to the differences in social experience between members of different groups in the UK.

Second, sociological research provides

#### Modern theoretical approaches

**Symbolic interactionism** stresses the exchange of symbols between individuals in social interaction. Unlike other theories, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the small-scale interactions of individuals, not society as a whole.

**Functionalism** looks at society as a whole, emphasizing the contribution a social activity makes to society. Merton, whose version of functionalism has been particularly influential, stressed that manifest functions, those intended by the participants in a social activity, are sometimes less important than latent functions, the unintentional consequences of a social act. Merton believed that a major part of sociological explanation is to uncover the latent functions of social acts and institutions.

Many contemporary social theorists are still influenced by Marx and have developed **conflict theories**. The study of inequality using the concept of class is at the heart of Marx's theory.

One way to think about sociology's theoretical approaches is to think in terms of levels of analysis. **Microsociology** is the study of everyday behaviour in situations of face-to-face interaction. **Macrosociology** is the analysis of large-scale social systems. The two are closely connected.

practical help in assessing the results of policy initiatives. A programme of practical reform may simply fail to achieve what its designers sought or may produce unintended consequences of an unfortunate kind. For instance, in the years following World War II, large public housing blocks were built in city centres in many countries. These were planned to provide high standards of accommodation for low-income groups from slum areas and offered shopping amenities and other civic services nearby. However, research later showed that many people who had moved from their previous dwellings to large apartment blocks felt isolated and

unhappy. High-rise apartment blocks and shopping centres in poorer areas often became dilapidated and provided breeding grounds for muggings and other violent crimes.

Third, and in some ways this is the most important, sociology can provide us with self-enlightenment – increased self-understanding. The more we know about why we act as we do and about the overall workings of our society, the more likely we are to be able to influence our own futures. We should not see sociology as assisting only policy-makers – that is, powerful groups – in making informed decisions. Those in power cannot be assumed always to consider the interests of the less powerful or underprivileged in the policies they pursue. Self-enlightened groups can often benefit from sociological research by using the information gleaned to respond in an effective way to government policies or form policy initiatives of their own. Self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and social movements like the environmental movement are examples of social groups that have directly sought to bring about practical reforms, with some degree of success.

Finally, it should be mentioned that many sociologists concern themselves directly with practical matters as professionals. People trained in sociology are to be found as industrial consultants, urban planners, social workers and personnel managers, as well as in many other jobs. An understanding of society can also help for careers in law, journalism, business and medicine.

There is often a connection between

studying sociology and the prompting of social conscience. Should sociologists themselves actively advocate and agitate for programmes of reform or social change? Some argue that sociology can preserve its intellectual independence only if sociologists are studiously neutral in moral and political controversies. Yet are scholars who remain aloof from current debates necessarily more impartial in their assessment of sociological issues than others? No sociologically sophisticated person can be unaware of the inequalities that exist in the world today. It would be strange if sociologists did not take sides on political issues, and it would be illogical to try to ban them from drawing on their expertise in so doing.

In this chapter, we have seen that sociology is a discipline in which we often set aside our personal view of the world to look more carefully at the influences that shape our lives and those of others. Sociology emerged as a distinct intellectual endeavour with the development of modern societies, and the study of such societies remains its principal concern. But sociologists are also preoccupied with a broad range of issues about the nature of social interaction and human societies in general.

Sociology isn't just an abstract intellectual field but has major practical implications for people's lives. Learning to become a sociologist shouldn't be a dull academic endeavour. The best way to make sure it doesn't become so is to approach the subject in an imaginative way and to relate sociological ideas and findings to situations in your own life.



## Summary points

Sociology can be identified as the systematic study of human societies, giving special emphasis to modern, industrialized systems.

The practice of sociology involves the ability to think imaginatively and to detach oneself from preconceived ideas about social life.

Sociology came into being as an attempt to understand the far-reaching changes that have occurred in human societies over the past two or three centuries. The changes involved are not just large-scale ones; they also involve shifts in the most intimate and personal characteristics of people's lives.

Among the classical founders of sociology, four figures are particularly important: Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Comte and Marx, working in the mid-nineteenth century, established some of the basic issues of sociology, later elaborated on by Durkheim and Weber. These issues concern the nature of sociology and the impact of the changes brought about by modernization on the social world.

A diversity of theoretical approaches is found in sociology. Theoretical disputes are difficult to resolve even in the natural sciences, and

in sociology we face special difficulties because of the complex problems involved in subjecting our own behaviour to study.

- 6 The main theoretical approaches in sociology are functionalism, conflict perspectives and symbolic interactionism. There are some basic differences between each of these approaches, which have strongly influenced the development of the subject in the post-war period.
- 7 Sociology is a subject with important practical implications. It can contribute to social criticism and practical social reform in several ways. To begin with, the improved understanding of a given set of social circumstances often gives us all a better chance of controlling them. At the same time, sociology provides the means of increasing our cultural sensitivities, allowing policies to be based on an awareness of divergent cultural values. In practical terms, we can investigate the consequences of the adoption of particular policy programmes. Finally, and perhaps most important, sociology provides self-enlightenment, offering groups and individuals an increased opportunity to alter the conditions of their own lives.

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