

1 INTRODUCTION



SOURCE: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, by Lewis Carroll; illustration by John Tenniel. (1960) New York: Penguin. Used by permission.

Key Concepts

- Theory
- Order
 - Collective/individual
- Action
 - Rational/nonrational
- Enlightenment
- Counter-Enlightenment

“But I’m not a serpent, I tell you!” said Alice. “I’m a—I’m a—”

“Well! What are you?” said the Pigeon. “I can see you’re trying to invent something!”

“I—I’m a little girl,” said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

“A likely story indeed!” said the Pigeon, in a tone of the deepest contempt. “I’ve seen a good

many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!"

"I have tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say."

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865/1960:54)

In the passage above, the Pigeon had a theory: Alice is a serpent because she has a long neck and eats eggs. Alice, however, had a different theory: she was a little girl. It was not the “facts” that were disputed in the above passage, however. Alice freely admitted she had a long neck and ate eggs. So why did Alice and the Pigeon come to such different conclusions? Why didn’t the facts “speak for themselves”?

Alice and the Pigeon both *interpreted* the question (What is Alice?) using the categories, concepts, and assumptions with which each was familiar. It was these unarticulated concepts, assumptions, and categories that led the Pigeon and Alice to have such different conclusions.

Likewise, social life can be perplexing and complex. It is hard enough to know “the facts,” let alone to know *why* things are as they seem. In this regard, theory is vital to making sense of social life because it holds assorted observations and facts together (as it did for Alice and the Pigeon). Facts make sense only because we interpret them using preexisting categories and assumptions, that is, “theories.” The point is that even so-called facts are based on implicit assumptions and unacknowledged presuppositions. Whether or not we are consciously aware of them, our everyday life is filled with theories as we seek to understand the world around us. The importance of formal sociological theorizing is that it makes assumptions and categories explicit, hence makes them open to examination, scrutiny, and reformulation.

To be sure, some students find classical sociological theory as befuddling as Alice found her conversation with the Pigeon. Some students find it difficult to understand and interpret what classical theorists are saying. Indeed, some students wonder why they have to read works written more than a century ago, or why they have to study sociological theory at all. After all, they maintain, classical sociological theory is abstract and dry and has “nothing to do with my life.” So why not just study contemporary theory (or, better yet, just examine empirical “reality”), and leave the old, classical theories behind?

In this book, we seek to demonstrate the continuing relevance of classical sociological theory. We argue that the theorists whose work you will read in

this book are vital: first, because they helped chart the course of the discipline of sociology from its inception until the present time, and second, because their concepts and theories still permeate contemporary concerns. Sociologists still seek to explain such critical issues as the nature of capitalism, the basis of social solidarity or cohesion, the role of authority in social life, the benefits and dangers posed by modern bureaucracies, the dynamics of gender and racial oppression, and the nature of the “self,” to name but a few. Classical sociological theory provides a pivotal conceptual base with which to explore today’s world. To be sure, this world is more complex than it was a century ago, or for that matter, than it has been throughout most of human history, during which time individuals lived in small bands as hunter-gatherers. With agricultural and later industrial advances, however, societies grew increasingly complex. The growing complexity, in turn, led to questions about what is distinctively “modern” about contemporary life. Sociology was born as a way of thinking about just such questions; today, we face similar questions about the “postmodern” world. The concepts and ideas introduced by classical theorists enable us to ponder the causes and consequences of the incredible rate and breadth of change.

The purpose of this book is to provide students not only with core classical sociological readings, but also with a framework for comprehending them. In this introductory chapter, we discuss (1) *what* sociological theory is, (2) *why* it is important for students to read the original works of the “core” figures in sociology, (3) *who* these “core” theorists are, and (4) *how* students can develop a more critical and gratifying understanding of some of the most important ideas advanced by these theorists. To this end, we introduce a metatheoretical framework that enables students to navigate, compare, and contrast the theorists’ central ideas as well as to contemplate *any* social issue within our own increasingly complex world.

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?

Theory is a system of generalized statements or propositions about phenomena. There are two additional features, however, that together distinguish scientific theories from other idea systems such as those found in religion or philosophy. Scientific theories

1. explain and predict the phenomena in question, and
2. produce testable and thus falsifiable hypotheses.

Universal laws are intended to explain and predict events occurring in the natural or physical world. For instance, Isaac Newton established three laws

of motion. The first law, the law of inertia, states that objects in motion will remain in motion and objects at rest will remain at rest, unless acted on by another force. In its explanation and predictions regarding the movement of objects, this law extends beyond the boundaries of time and space. For their part, sociologists seek to develop or refine general statements about some aspect of *social* life. For example, a long-standing (although not uncontested) sociological theory predicts that as a society becomes more modern, the salience of religion will decline. Similar to Newton's law of inertia, the secularization theory, as it is called, is not restricted in its scope to any one time period or population. Instead, it is an abstract proposition that can be tested in any society once the key concepts making up the theory—"modern" and "religion"—are defined, and once observable measures are specified.

Thus, sociological theories share certain characteristics with theories developed in other branches of science. However, there are significant differences between social and other scientific theories (i.e., theories in the social sciences as opposed to the natural sciences) as well. First, sociological theories tend to be more evaluative and critical than theories in the natural sciences. Sociological theories are often rooted in implicit moral assumptions that contrast with traditional notions of scientific objectivity. In other words, it is often supposed that the pursuit of scientific knowledge should be free from value judgments or moral assessments, that the first and foremost concern of science is to uncover what *is*, not what *ought* to be. Indeed, such objectivity is often cast as a defining feature of science, one that separates it from other forms of knowledge based on tradition, religion, or philosophy. But sociologists tend to be interested not only in understanding the workings of society, but also in realizing a more just or equitable social order. As you will see, the work of the core classical theorists is shaped in important respects by their own moral sensibilities regarding the condition of modern societies and what the future may bring. Thus, sociological theorizing at times falls short of the "ideal" science practiced more closely (though still imperfectly) by "hard" sciences like physics, biology, or chemistry. For some observers, this failure to conform consistently to the ideals of either science or philosophy is a primary reason for the discipline's troublesome identity crisis and "ugly duckling" status within the academic world. For others, it represents the opportunity to develop a unique understanding of social life.

A second difference between sociological theories and those found in other scientific disciplines stems from the nature of their respective subjects. Societies are always in the process of change, while the changes themselves can be spurred by any number of causes including internal conflicts, wars with other countries, scientific or technological advances, or through the expansion of economic markets that in turn spread foreign cultures and goods.

As a result, it is more difficult to fashion universal laws to explain societal dynamics. Moreover, we must also bear in mind that humans, unlike other animals or naturally occurring elements in the physical world, are motivated to act by a complex array of social and psychological forces. Our behaviors are not the product of any one principle; instead, they can be driven by self-interest, altruism, loyalty, passion, tradition, or habit, to name but a few factors. From these remarks, you can see the difficulties inherent in developing universal laws of societal development and individual behavior, despite our earlier example of the secularization theory as well as other efforts to forge such laws.

These two aspects of sociological theory (the significance of moral assumptions and the nature of the subject matter) are responsible, in part, for the form in which much sociological theory is written. Although some theorists construct formal propositions or laws to explain and predict social events and individual actions, more often theories are developed through storylike narratives. Thus, few of the original readings included in this volume contain explicitly stated propositions. One of the intellectual challenges you will face in studying the selections is to uncover the general propositions embedded in the texts. Regardless of the style in which they are presented, however, the theories (or narratives) you will explore in this text answer the most central social questions, while revealing taken-for-granted truths and encouraging you to examine who you are and where we, as a society, are headed.

WHY READ ORIGINAL WORKS?

Some professors agree with students that original works are just too hard to decipher. These professors use secondary textbooks that interpret and simplify the ideas of core theorists. Their argument is that you simply cannot capture students' attention using original works; students must be engaged in order to understand, and secondary texts ultimately lead to a better grasp of the covered theories.

However, there is a significant problem with reading only interpretations of original works: The secondary and original texts are not the same. Secondary texts do not simply translate what the theorist wrote into simpler terms; rather, in order to simplify, they must revise what an author has said.

The problems that can arise from even the most faithfully produced interpretations can be illustrated by the "telephone game." Recall that childhood game where you and your friends sit in a circle. One person thinks of a message and whispers it to the next person, who passes the message on to

the next person, until the last person in the circle announces the message aloud. Usually, everyone roars with laughter because the message at the end typically is nothing like the one circulated at the beginning. This is because the message inadvertently is misinterpreted and changed as it goes around.

In the telephone game, the goal is to repeat exactly what has been said to you. Yet, misinterpretations and modifications are commonplace. Consider now a secondary text in which the goal is not to restate exactly what originally was written, but to take the original source and make it “easier” to understand. Although this process of simplification perhaps allows you to understand the secondary text, you are at least one step removed from what the original author wrote.¹ At the same time, you have no way of actually knowing what was written in the original work. Moreover, when you start thinking and writing about the material presented in the secondary reading, you are not one, but *two* steps removed from the original text. If the purpose of a course in classical sociological theory is to grapple with the ideas that preoccupied the core figures of the field—the ideas and analyses that would come to shape the direction of sociology for more than a century—then studying original works must be a cornerstone of the course.

To this end, we provide excerpts from the original writings of those we consider to be sociology’s core classical theorists. If students are to understand Karl Marx’s writings, they must read *Marx*, and not a simplified interpretation of his ideas. They must learn to study for themselves what the initiators of sociology have said about some of the most fundamental social issues, the relevance of which is timeless.

Yet, we also provide in this book a secondary interpretation of the theorists’ overall frameworks and the selected readings. Our intent is to provide a guide (albeit simplified) for understanding the original works. The secondary interpretation will help you navigate the different writing styles often resulting from the particular historical, contextual, and geographical locations in which the theorists were rooted.

WHO ARE SOCIOLOGY’S CORE THEORISTS?

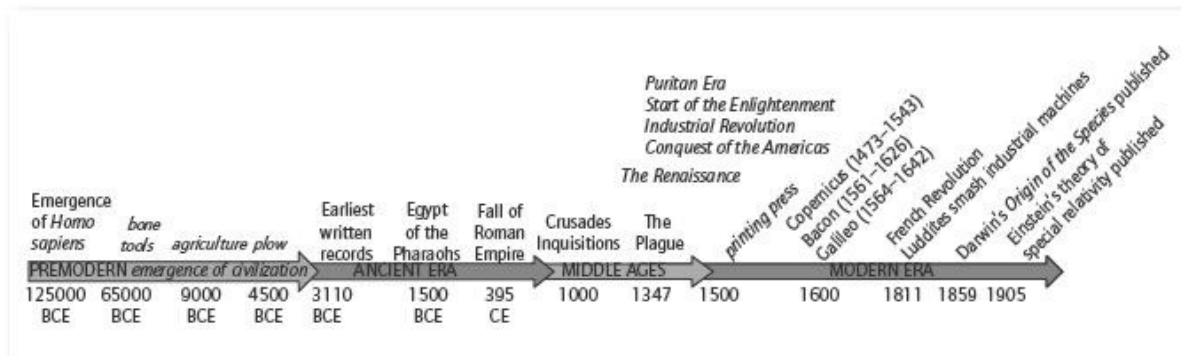
Our conviction that students should read the core classical sociological theorists raises an important question: Who are the core theorists? After all, the discipline of sociology has been influenced by dozens of philosophers and social thinkers. Given this fact, is it right to hold up a handful of scholars as *the* core theorists of sociology? Doesn’t this lead to the canonization of a few “dead, white, European men”?

In our view, the answer is yes, it is right (or at least not wrong) to cast a select group of intellectuals as the core writers in the discipline; and yes, this is, to an extent, the canonization of a few dead, white, European men. On the other hand, it is these thinkers from whom later social theorists (who are not all dead, white, European, or male) primarily have drawn for inspiration and insight. To better understand our rationale for including some theorists while excluding others, it is important first to briefly consider the historical context that set the stage for the development of sociology as a discipline.

The Enlightenment

Many of the seeds for what would become sociology were first planted during the **Enlightenment**, a period of remarkable intellectual development that originated in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (see Figure 1.1). The development of civil society (open spaces of debate relatively free from government control) and the quickening pace of the modern world enabled a newly emerging mass of literate citizens to think about the economic, political, and cultural conditions that shaped society. As a result, a number of long-standing ideas and beliefs about social life were turned upside down. The Enlightenment, however, was not so much a fixed set of ideas as it was a new attitude, a new method of thought. One of the most important aspects of this new attitude was an emphasis on *reason*, which demanded the questioning and reexamination of received ideas and values regarding the physical world, human nature, and their relationship to God.

Figure 1.1 Historical Eras: A Partial Timeline



Before this period, there were no institutionalized academic disciplines seeking to explain the workings of the natural and social worlds. Aside from folklore, there were only the interpretations of nature and humanity sanctioned by the Catholic Church. Based on myth and faith, such explanations of the conditions of existence took on a taken-for-granted quality that largely isolated them from criticism (Lemert 1993; Seidman 1994). Enlightenment intellectuals challenged myth- and faith-based truths by subjecting them to the dictates of reason and its close cousin, science.

Scientific thought had itself only begun to emerge in the fifteenth century through the efforts of astronomers and scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Bacon (see Figure 1.1). Copernicus's discovery in the early sixteenth century that the Earth orbited the sun directly contradicted the literal understanding of the Bible, which placed the Earth at the center of the universe. With his inventive improvement to the telescope, Galileo confirmed Copernicus's heliocentric view the following century. Galileo's contemporary, Sir Francis Bacon, developed an experimental, inductive approach to analyzing the natural world for which he has come to be known as the "father of the scientific method." In advocating the triumph of reasoned investigation over faith, these early scientists and the Enlightenment intellectuals who followed in their footsteps rebuked existing knowledge as fraught with prejudice and mindless tradition (Seidman 1994:20–21). Not surprisingly, such views were dangerous because they challenged the authority of religious beliefs and those charged with advancing them. Indeed, Galileo was convicted of heresy by the Catholic Church, had his work banned, and spent the last ten years of his life under house arrest for advocating a heliocentric view of the universe.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Enlightenment thinkers did not set out to disprove the existence of God; with few exceptions, there were no admitted atheists during this period of European history. But though they did not deny that the universe was divinely created, they did deny that God and his work were inscrutable. Instead, they viewed the universe as a mechanical system composed of matter in motion that obeyed natural laws that could be uncovered by means of methodical observation and empirical research. Thus, when Newton developed his theory of gravity, a giant leap forward in the development of mathematics and physics, he was offering proof of God's existence. For Newton, only the intelligence of a divine power could have ordered the universe so perfectly around the sun as to prevent the planets from colliding under forces of gravity (Armstrong 1994:303). Similarly, Rene Descartes was convinced that reason and mathematics could provide certainty of God whose existence could be demonstrated rationally, much like a geometric proof. Faith and reason for these individuals were not irreconcilable. The heresy committed by the Enlightenment thinkers was their attempt to solve the mystery of God's design of the natural world through the methodical, empirical discovery of eternal laws. Miracles were for the ignorant and superstitious.

Later Enlightenment thinkers, inspired by growing sophistication within the fields of physics and mathematics, would begin to advance a view of science that sought to uncover not God's imprint in the universe but, rather, the natural laws of matter that ordered the universe independent of the will of a

divine Creator. Scientific inquiry was no longer tied to proving God's existence. Belief in the existence of God was becoming more a private matter of conviction and conscience that could not be subjected to rational proof, but rested instead on faith. Some of the most renowned physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers of modern Western societies, from Pascal and Spinoza to Kant, Diderot, and Hume, would come to see God as a comforting idea that could offer certainty and meaning in the world or as a way to represent the summation of the causal laws and principles that ordered the universe. God, however, was not understood as a transcendent, omniscient Being who was responsible for the design of the universe and all that happens in it. And if the existence of God could not be logically or scientifically proven, then faith in his existence mattered little in explanations of reality (Armstrong 1994:311–15, 341–43). There was no longer any room left in reason and science for God.

The rise of science and empiricism ushered in by the Enlightenment would give birth to sociology in the mid-nineteenth century. The central idea behind the emerging discipline was that society could be the subject of scientific examination in the same manner as biological organisms or the physical properties of material objects. Indeed, the French intellectual Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who coined the term “sociology” in 1839, also used the term “social physics” to refer to this new discipline and his organic conceptualization of society (see Significant Others box in chapter 3). The term “social physics” reflects the Enlightenment view that the discipline of sociology parallels other natural sciences. Comte argued that, like natural scientists, sociologists should uncover, rationally and scientifically, the laws of the social world.² For Enlighteners, the main difference between scientific knowledge and either theological explanation or mere conjecture is that scientific knowledge can be tested. Thus, for Comte, the new science of society—sociology—involved (1) the analysis of the central elements and functions of social systems, using (2) concrete historical and comparative methods in order to (3) establish testable generalizations about them (Fletcher 1966:14).³

However, it was the French theorist **Émile Durkheim** (1858–1917), discussed in chapter 3, who arguably was most instrumental in laying the groundwork for the emerging discipline of sociology. Durkheim emphasized that while the primary domain of psychology is to understand processes internal to the individual (e.g., personality or instincts), the primary domain of sociology is “social facts”: that is, conditions and circumstances external to the individual that nevertheless determine that individual's course of action. As a scientist, Durkheim advocated a systematic and methodical examination of social facts and their impact on individuals.

Interestingly, sociology reflects a complex mix of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment ideas (Seidman 1994). In the late eighteenth century, a conservative reaction to the Enlightenment took place. Under the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), the unabashed embrace of rationality, technology, and progress was challenged. Against the emphasis on reason, counter-Enlighteners highlighted the significance of nonrational factors such as tradition, emotions, ritual, and ceremony. Most important, counter-Enlighteners were concerned that the accelerating pace of industrialization and urbanization and the growing pervasiveness of bureaucratization were producing profoundly disorganizing effects. In one of his most important works, *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau argued that in order to have a free and equal society, there must be a genuine social contract in which everyone participates in creating laws for the good of society. Thus, rather than being oppressed by impersonal bureaucracy and laws imposed from above, people would willingly obey the laws because they had helped make them. Rousseau also challenged the age of reason, echoing Blaise Pascal's view that the heart has reasons that reason does not know. When left to themselves, our rational faculties leave us lifeless and cold, uncertain and unsure (see McMahon 2001:35).

In a parallel way, as you will see in chapter 3, Durkheim was interested in both objective or external social facts and the more subjective elements of society, such as feelings of solidarity or commitment to a moral code. Akin to Rousseau, Durkheim believed that it was these subjective elements that ultimately held societies together. Similarly, **Karl Marx** (1818–1883), who is another of sociology's core figures (though he saw himself as an economist and social critic), fashioned an economic philosophy that was at once rooted in science and humanist prophecy. As you will see in chapter 2, Marx analyzed not only the economic dynamics of capitalism, but also the social and moral problems inherent to the capitalist system. Additionally, as you will see in chapter 4, another of sociology's core theorists, **Max Weber** (1864–1920), combined a methodical, scientific approach with a concern about both the material conditions and idea systems of modern societies.

Economic and Political Revolutions

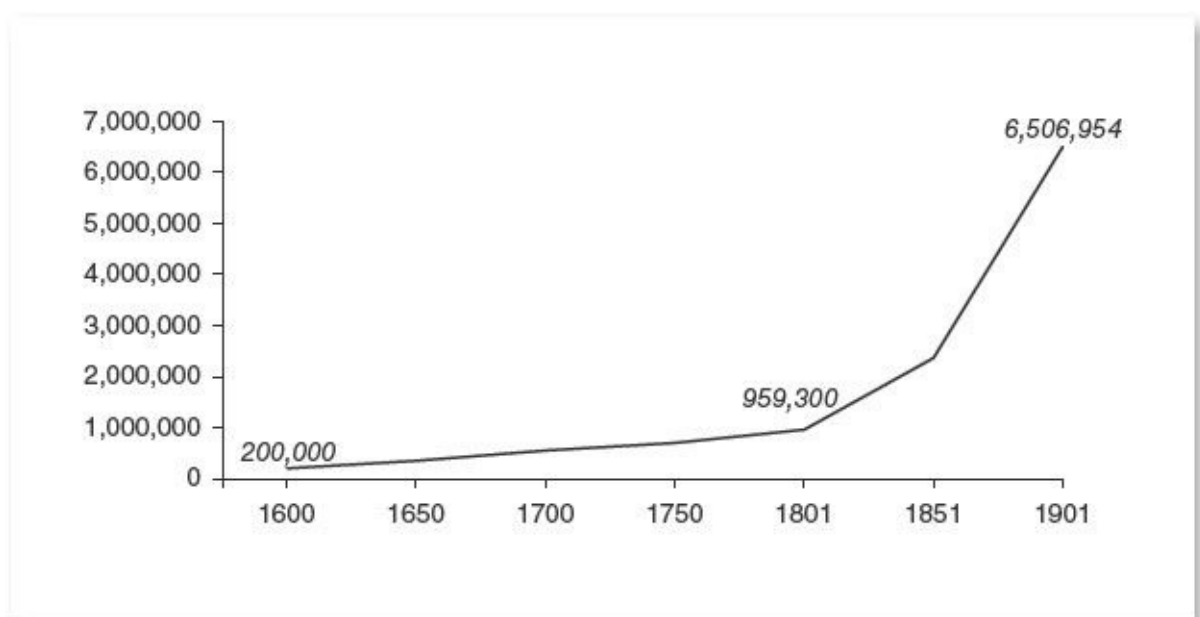
Thus far, we have discussed how the discipline of sociology emerged within a specific intellectual environment. But of course, the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment were both the cause and the effect of a host of social and political developments that also affected the newly emerging discipline of sociology. Tremendous economic, political, and religious transformations had been taking place in Western Europe since the sixteenth century. The new discipline of sociology sought to explain scientifically both

the causes and the effects of such extraordinary social change.

One of the most important of these changes was the Industrial Revolution, a period of enormous change that began in England in the eighteenth century. The term “Industrial Revolution” refers to the application of power-driven machinery to agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing. Although industrialization began in remote times and continues today, this process completely transformed Europe in the eighteenth century. It turned Europe from a predominantly agricultural to a predominantly industrial society. It not only radically altered how goods were produced and distributed but galvanized the system of capitalism as well.

Before the advance of modern industrialization, social life in Europe revolved around the family and kinship networks defined by blood and marriage relations. The family served as the fundamental unit for socializing individuals into the moral codes that reinforced expected patterns of behavior. In addition to its educational role, the family was also the center of production and thus responsible for the material well-being of its members. Family members grew their own food, managed their own livestock, built their own shelters, welled their own water, and made their own clothes. In short, the family depended on the skills and ingenuity of its members, and those in the broader kinship network of which it was a part, for its survival. The family as a separate private sphere, distinct from and dependent on external economic and political institutions, did not yet exist. Likewise, the idea that one may embark on a “career” or envision alternative futures such that “anything is possible,” was inconceivable (Brown 1987:48).

Figure 1.2 London Population, 1600–1901

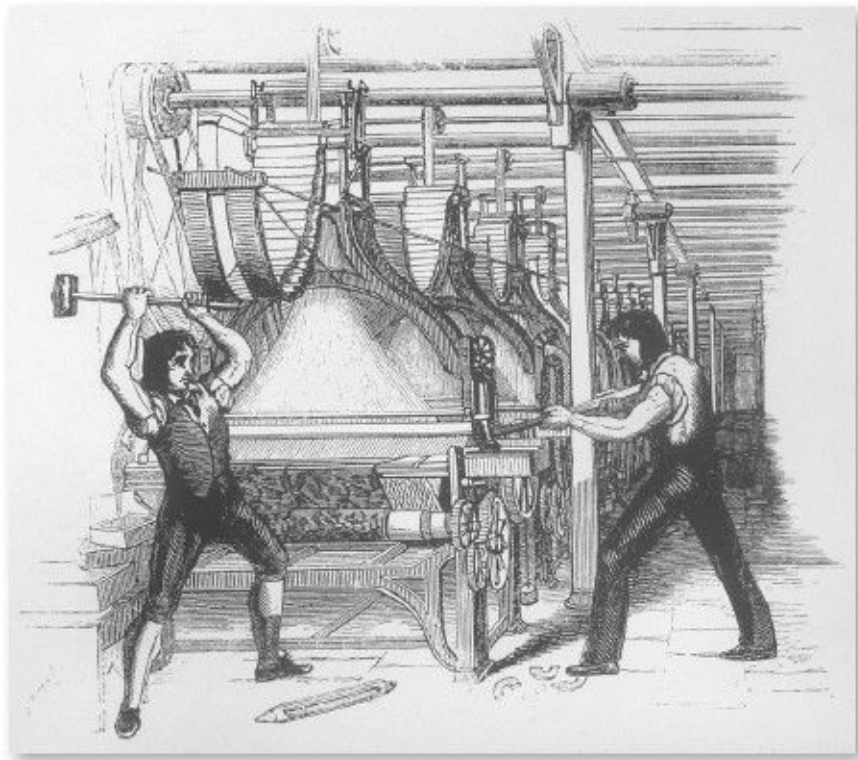


The rise of industrialization, however, dramatically reshaped the organization of society. Most of the world's population was rural before the Industrial Revolution, but by the mid-nineteenth century, half of the population of England lived in cities. As shown in Figure 1.2, the population of London grew from less than a million in 1800 to more than six and a half million in 1901. So too throughout Europe the population was becoming increasingly urban. By the end of the nineteenth century, half of the population of Europe lived in cities. Moreover, while there were scarcely any cities in Europe with populations of 100,000 in 1800, there were more than 150 cities that size a century later. This massive internal migration resulted from large numbers of people leaving farms and agricultural work to become wage earners in factories in the rapidly growing cities. The shift to factory production and wage labor meant that families were no longer the center of economic activity. Instead of producing their own goods for their own needs, families depended for their survival on impersonal labor and commodity markets. At the same time, states were establishing public bureaucracies, staffed by trained "functionaries," to provide a standardized education for children and to adjudicate disputes, punish rule violators, and guarantee recently enshrined individual rights. As a result of these transformations, the family was becoming increasingly privatized; its range of influence confined more and more to its own closed doors. The receding sway of family and community morality was coupled with the decline of the Church and religious worldviews. In their place came markets and bureaucratic organizations speaking their language of competition, profit, individual success, and instrumental efficiency. With the reorganization of society around the twin pillars of mass production and commerce, the "seven deadly sins became lively capitalist virtues: avarice became acumen; sloth, leisure; and pride, ambition" (Brown 1987:57).

The shift from agricultural to factory production had particularly profound effects on individuals. Technological changes brought ever-more-efficient machines and a growing routinization of tasks. For instance, with the introduction of the power loom in the textile industry, an unskilled worker could produce three and a half times as much as could the best handloom weaver. However, this rise in efficiency came at a tremendous human cost. Mechanized production reduced both the number of jobs available and the technical skills needed for work in the factory. Workers engaged in increasingly specialized and repetitive tasks that deprived them of meaningful connections with other workers, with the commodities they produced, and even with their own abilities. As work became more uniform, so did the workers themselves who were as interchangeable as the mass-produced commodities they produced. A few profited enormously, but most worked

long hours for low wages. Accidents were frequent and often quite serious. Workers were harshly punished and their wages were docked for the slightest mistakes. Women and children worked alongside men in noisy, unsafe conditions. Most factories were dirty, poorly ventilated and lit, and dangerous. From the 1760s onward, labor disputes began to result in sporadic outbreaks of violent resistance. Perhaps most famously were the episodes of machine-breaking that occurred in England in what has since become known as the Luddite disturbances (see Photo 1.1).

As you will read in chapter 2, Karl Marx was particularly concerned about the economic changes and disorganizing social effects that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Marx not only wrote articles and books on the harsh conditions faced by workers under capitalism, but also was a political activist who helped organize revolutionary labor movements to provoke broad social change. Émile Durkheim, whose work we discuss in chapter 3, likewise examined the effects brought on by a growing division of labor that simultaneously led to increasing individuality and the erosion of family and community bonds.



© Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy

Photo 1.1 This publicly distributed illustration shows frame-breakers, or Luddites, smashing a Jacquard loom in the 19th century. Machine-breaking was criminalized by Parliament as early as 1721, but Luddites met a heated response, and Parliament passed the Frame Breaking Act of 1812 which enabled the death penalty for machine-breakers.

As you will read in chapter 4, Max Weber also explored the social transformations taking place in European society in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. In contrast to Marx, however, Weber argued that it was not only economic structures (e.g., capitalism), but also organizational structures—most importantly bureaucracies—that profoundly affected social relations. Indeed, in one of the most famous metaphors in all of sociology, Weber compared modern society to an “iron cage.” Weber also examined the systems of meaning or ideas, particularly those associated with the growing rationalization of society, that both induced and resulted from such profound structural change.

The Enlightenment ignited political reverberations as well. For instance, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes called into question the authority of kings whose rule was justified by divine right. In his masterpiece of political philosophy, *Leviathan* (1651), he subscribed to a then-radical view that championed the natural equality of all individuals and insisted that individuals’ rights, social cooperation, and prosperity were best ensured through a strong central government that ruled through the consent of the people. His compatriot, John Locke, the “father of liberalism,” advocated the overturning of arbitrary, despotic monarchies, by revolution if necessary. Replacing them would be governments based on rational, impersonal laws designed to protect free and equal citizens’ rights to “life, liberty and estate.” Locke’s views on human nature, reason, equality, and rule by popular consent would inspire many of the leading figures of the American Revolution.

Consequently, the eighteenth century ushered in tremendous political transformations throughout Europe. One of the most significant political events of that time was the French Revolution, which shook France between 1787 and 1799 and toppled the *ancien régime*, or old rule, that for centuries had consolidated wealth, land, and power in the hands of the clergy and a nobility based on heredity. Inspired in large part by Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762), the basic principle of the French Revolution, as contained in its primary manifesto, “La Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen” (“The Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen”), was that “all men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” The French revolutionaries called for “liberty, fraternity, and equality.” Spurred by the philosophies of the Enlightenment, they sought to substitute reason for tradition, and equal rights for privilege. Political order could no longer be justified on the basis of a sacred, inviolable relation between rulers and subjects. Because the revolutionaries sought to build a constitutional government from the bottom up, the French Revolution stimulated profound political rethinking about the nature of government and its proper relation to its citizens, and set the stage for democratic uprisings throughout Europe.

However, the French Revolution sparked a bloody aftermath, making it

clear that even democratic revolutions involve tremendous social disruption and that heinous deeds can be done in the name of freedom. The public beheading of King Louis XVI in the *Place de la Révolution* (“Revolution Square”) ushered in what would come to be called the “Reign of Terror.” Led by Maximilien Robespierre, radical democrats rounded up and executed anyone—whether on the left or right of the political spectrum—suspected of being opposed to the revolution. In the months between September 1793 (when Robespierre took power) and July 1794 (when Robespierre was overthrown and executed), revolutionary zealots, under the auspices of the newly created “Committee of Public Safety,” arrested about 300,000 people, executed some 17,000, and imprisoned thousands more. It was during this radical period of the Republic that the guillotine, adopted as an efficient and merciful method of execution, became the symbol of the Terror. While the years following the French Revolution by no means drew a straight line to creating a democratically elected government guaranteeing the rights and equality of all, its effects nevertheless reverberated across the continent. The legitimacy of monarchical rule and inherited privilege that had undergirded European societies for centuries was now challenged by a worldview that sought to place the direction of political and economic life into the hands of individuals armed with the capacity to reason.

The Ins and Outs of Classical Canons

Thus far, we have argued that the central figures at the heart of classical sociological theory all sought to explain the extraordinary economic, political, and social transformations taking place in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Yet, concerns about the nature of social bonds and how these bonds can be maintained in the face of extant social change existed long before the eighteenth century and in many places, not only in Western Europe. Indeed, in the late fourteenth century, Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun (1332–1406), born in Tunis, Tunisia, in North Africa, thought and wrote extensively on subjects that have much in common with contemporary sociology (Martindale 1981:134–36; Ritzer 2000:10). And long before the fourteenth century, Plato (ca. 428–ca. 347 bc), Aristotle (384–22 bc), and Thucydides (ca. 460–ca. 400 bc) wrote about the nature of war, the origins of the family and the state, and the relationship between religion and the government—topics that have since become central to sociology (Seidman 1994:19). Aristotle, for example, emphasized that human beings were naturally political animals—*zoon politikon* (Martin 1999:157). He sought to identify the essence that made a stone a stone or a society a society (Ashe 1999:89). For that matter, well before Aristotle’s time, Confucius (551–479 bc) developed a theory for understanding Chinese society. Akin to Aristotle, Confucius maintained that government is the center of people’s lives and that all other considerations

derive from it. According to Confucius, a good government must be concerned with three things: sufficient food, a sufficient army, and the confidence of the people (Jaspers 1957/1962:47).

These premodern thinkers are better understood as philosophers, however, and not as sociologists. Both Aristotle and Confucius were less concerned with explaining social dynamics than with prescribing a perfected, moral social world. As a result, their ideas are guided less by a scientific pursuit of knowledge than by an ideological commitment to a specific set of values. Moreover, in contrast to modern sociologists, premodern thinkers tended to see the universe as a static, hierarchical order in which all beings, human and otherwise, have a more or less fixed and proper place and purpose, and they sought to identify the “natural” moral structure of the universe (Seidman 1994:19).

Our key point here is that, while the ideas of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are today at the heart of the classical sociological theoretical canon, this does not mean that they are inherently better or more original than those of other intellectuals who wrote before or after them. Rather, it is to say that, for specific historical, social, and cultural as well as intellectual reasons, their works have helped define the discipline of sociology, and that sociologists refine, rework, and challenge their ideas to this day.

For that matter, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim have not always been considered the core theorists in sociology. On the contrary, until 1940, Weber and Durkheim were not especially adulated by American sociologists (Bierstedt 1981). Until that time, discussions of their work were largely absent from texts. Marx was not included in the canon until the 1960s. Meanwhile, even a cursory look at mid-century sociological theory textbooks reveals an array of important “core figures,” including Sumner, Sorokin, Sorel, Pareto, Le Play, Ammon, Veblen, de Tocqueville, Cooley, Spencer, Tönnies, and Martineau. Although an extended discussion of all of these theorists is outside the scope of this volume, we provide a brief look at some of these scholars in the Significant Others boxes of the chapters that follow.

In the second half of this book, we focus on several writers who for social or cultural reasons were underappreciated as sociologists in their day. **Charlotte Perkins Gilman** (1860–1935), for example, was well known as a writer and radical feminist in her time, but not as a sociologist (Degler 1966:vii). It was not until the 1960s that there was a formalized sociological area called “feminist theory.” Gilman sought to explain the basis of gender inequality in modern industrial society. She explored the fundamental questions that would become the heart of feminist social theory some 50 years later, when writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan

popularized these same concerns.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918), a German sociologist, wrote works that would later become pivotal in sociology, though his career was consistently stymied both because of the unusual breadth and content of his work and because of his Jewish background.⁴ Simmel sought to uncover the basic *forms* of social interaction, such as “exchange,” “conflict,” and “domination,” that take place between individuals. Above all, Simmel underscored the contradictions of modern life. For instance, he emphasized how individuals strive both to conform to social groups and, at the same time, to distinguish themselves from others. Simmel’s provocative work is gaining more and more relevance in today’s world, in which contradictions and ironies abound.

While anti-Semitism prevented Simmel from receiving his full due, and sexism impeded Gilman (as well as other women scholars) from achieving hers, the forces of racism in the United States forestalled the sociological career of the African American intellectual **W. E. B. Du Bois** (1868–1963). Not surprisingly, it was this very racism that would become Du Bois’s most pressing scholarly concern. Du Bois sought to develop a sociological theory about the interpenetration of race and class in America at a time when most sociologists ignored or glossed over the issue of racism. Although underappreciated in his day, Du Bois’s insights are at the heart of contemporary sociological theories of race relations.

We conclude this book with the work of the social philosopher **George Herbert Mead** (1863–1931). Mead laid the foundation for symbolic interactionism, which has been one of the major perspectives in sociological theory since the middle of the twentieth century. Mead challenged prevailing psychological theories about the mind by highlighting the social basis of thinking and communication. Mead’s provocative work on the emergent, symbolic dimensions of human interaction continue to shape virtually all social, psychological, and symbolic interactionist research today.

HOW CAN WE NAVIGATE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?

Thus far, we have (1) explained the imperativeness of sociological theory, (2) argued that students should read original theoretical works, and (3) discussed the theorists whom we consider to be at the heart of classical sociological theory. Now we come to the fourth question: How can we best navigate the wide range of ideas that these theorists bring to the fore? To this end, in this section we explain the metatheoretical framework or “map” that we use in this book to explore and compare and contrast the work of each theorist.