To Mother, With appreciation and love GR To Michelle, with love JS
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Classical Sociological Theory

Seventh Edition

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Preface

This is the seventh edition of *Classical Sociological Theory*. For this new edition we are pleased to be with SAGE Publishing. SAGE brings a new look, new energy, and exciting future for this book. As with all previous editions, the focus is the in-depth discussion of classical sociological theories. The social world is a complex and difficult subject; so are many of the theories about it. We have striven to make theory interesting, relevant, and as clear and accessible as possible. As always, these discussions are accompanied by numerous examples and biographical sketches of the most important thinkers of the history of sociology.

This edition comes with two important additions. First, in previous editions, Chapters 1 and 2 outlined the history of sociological thought. These chapters included descriptions of the major historical forces that shaped the development of sociological theory (e.g., the Industrial Revolution, the rise of capitalism, the emergence of the feminist movement). These chapters remain an important part of this edition. However, to further deepen the historical context of theory, throughout the text we have added historical contexts boxes. Like the biographical sketches, these are meant to complement and deepen the theoretical materials. Theories are always created within historical settings. They do not arise out of thin air, but respond to the problems of the time in which they are created. It is our hope that our emphasis on historical context brings to life theory in an inspiring way.

Second, we have added contemporary application sections at the end of most chapters. This addition is motivated by the understanding that students are eager to see the relevance of classical theory for the contemporary moment. Some theories are less relevant than others. For example, the work of Auguste Comte, although important to the development of sociological theory, does not have much of substance to offer contemporary researchers. However, he is one of the rare exceptions. Sociologists and sociological theorists continue to engage the classical theorists in innovative and exciting ways. In each of the contemporary application sections, we summarize two or three recent research studies that make use of classical theoretical concepts. While the kinds of applications vary, we have chosen those that deal with cutting-edge sociological issues. For example, students will discover how classical ideas have been applied to understand race and racism (Chapter 7), the environment (Chapters 12 and 15), the impact of the Internet and digital media on social life (Chapters 3 and 7), and contemporary economic problems (Chapters 6 and 13).

As usual, this edition of *Classical Sociological Theory* includes updated references throughout. Whereas the core of each chapter remains unchanged, there are several chapters that include significant additions:

- In Chapter 1, we have added a discussion of colonialism to the section on social forces. Colonialism, as we point out in Chapter 1 and Chapter 11, is an important, though often neglected (at least in mainstream sociological theory), factor in the development of modern society. We’ve added this material to underline its importance.
- In Chapter 2, we have expanded the discussion of the historical significance of the Early Women Founders and W. E. B. Du Bois, especially Du Bois’s contribution to the development of the Atlanta
School of Sociology.

- The timelines in both Chapters 1 and 2 have been updated with new material and the timeline in Chapter 1 is presented in a new, easier-to-navigate form.
- Chapter 3 includes a new section on Tocqueville’s writings about colonialism.
- Chapter 7 includes new material on Durkheim’s debate with Gabriel Tarde, an enhanced section on collective effervescence, and updates on contemporary commentary on Durkheim.
- Chapter 9, on Simmel, has been updated to include material from his recently translated, later writings. This addition is significant because it introduces the concept of “life” and shows how it influenced Simmel’s overall theory.
- Chapter 11 on Du Bois is also significantly revised. It includes a lengthier discussion of his intellectual influences and a discussion of his significance as a founder of American sociology.
- The introductions to the chapters on Mead (Chapter 15) and Schutz (Chapter 16) have been rewritten to clarify these theorists’ most significant contributions to the field.

To make room for these additions, we have removed the Appendix on Sociological Metatheorizing and selectively removed material from chapters throughout the book. None of these changes impacts the core of the book.

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Acknowledgments

Once again, we want to thank Patricia Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge for writing their important Chapter 10 on classical feminist theory. We are also grateful to Craig Lair, who coauthored the chapter on Schumpeter for the previous edition, and Doug Goodman, who made contributions to earlier editions of this book. In addition, we want to thank Ed Lorkovic and Michelle Meagher for their comments on parts of these revisions.

Importantly, for this new edition we have worked with a new publisher, SAGE Publishing. SAGE has been a long collaborator with George Ritzer and we are thrilled to be working with them on this book. For his help in bringing this book over to SAGE and preparing revisions, we are particularly grateful to Jeff Lasser.

Finally, thanks are due to a panel of reviewers whose comments and suggestions helped to make this edition a better book.

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About the Author

George Ritzer

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PART I Introduction to Classical Sociological Theory
1 A Historical Sketch of Sociological Theory: The Early Years
Chapter Outline

Introduction
Social Forces in the Development of Sociological Theory
Intellectual Forces and the Rise of Sociological Theory
The Development of French Sociology
The Development of German Sociology
The Origins of British Sociology
The Key Figure in Early Italian Sociology
Turn-of-the-Century Developments in European Marxism
The Contemporary Relevance of Classical Sociological Theory

This book is designed as an introduction to the work of the classical sociological theorists, and we begin with one-sentence statements that get to the essence of the theories to be covered in these pages:

- We are headed to an increasingly centralized world with less individual freedom. (*Alexis de Tocqueville*)
- We are evolving in the direction of a world dominated by science. (*Auguste Comte*)
- The world is moving in the direction of increasing order and harmony. (*Herbert Spencer*)
- Capitalism is based on the exploitation of the workers by the capitalists. (*Karl Marx*)
- The modern world offers less moral cohesion than did earlier societies. (*Emile Durkheim*)
- The modern world is an iron cage of rational systems from which there is no escape. (*Max Weber*)
- The city spawns a particular type of person. (*Georg Simmel*)
- Gender inequality explains most of individual experience, the ills in society, and history. (*Charlotte Perkins Gilman*)
- A “veil” rather than a wall separates African Americans and whites. (*W. E. B. Du Bois*)
- People engage in conspicuous consumption. (*Thorstein Veblen*)
- Capitalism is virtually synonymous with “creative destruction.” (*Joseph Schumpeter*)
- Knowledge is shaped by the social world. (*Karl Mannheim*)
- People’s minds and their conceptions of themselves are shaped by their social experiences. (*George Herbert Mead*)
- In their social relationships, people often rely on tried and true “recipes” for how to handle such relationships. (*Alfred Schutz*)
- Society is an integrated system of social structures and functions. (*Talcott Parsons*)

This book is devoted to helping the reader to better understand these theoretical ideas, as well as the larger theories from which they are drawn, within the context of the lifework of the classical theorists.
Introduction

By classical sociological theory we mean theories of great scope and ambition that either were created during sociology’s classical age in Europe (roughly the early 1800s through the early 1900s) or had their roots in that period and culture (see Figure 1.1). The theories of Tocqueville, Martineau, Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Mannheim were produced during the classical age largely in France, England, and Germany. The theories of Veblen, Du Bois, Mead, Gilman, Addams, Schutz, and Parsons were largely produced later and mainly in the United States, but they had most of their sources in the classical age and in European intellectual traditions.

Figure 1.1 Sociological Theory: The Early Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social and Political Forces</th>
<th>Intellectual Forces</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Great Britain</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The work of these theorists is discussed in this book for two basic reasons. First, in all cases their work was important in its time and played a central role in the development of sociology in general and sociological theory in particular. Second, their ideas continue to be relevant to, and read by, contemporary sociologists, although this is less true of the work of Comte and Spencer (who are of more historical significance) than it is of the others.

This book does not deal with all sociological theory but rather with classical theory. However, to better understand the ideas of the classical theorists to be discussed in depth throughout this book, we begin with two chapters that offer an overview of the entire history of sociological theory. Chapter 1 deals with the early years of sociological theory, and Chapter 2 brings that history up to the present day and to the most recent developments in sociological theory. Taken together, these two chapters offer the context within which the work of the classical theorists is to be understood. The two introductory chapters are animated by the belief that it is important to understand not only the historical sources of classical theories but also their later impact. More generally, the reader should have a broad sense of sociological theory before turning to a detailed discussion of the classical theorists. The remainder of the body of this book (Chapters 3 through 17)
deals with the ideas of the major classical theorists. Thus, the ideas of the major classical theorists will be discussed twice. They will be introduced very briefly in either the first or second chapter in their historical context, and they will be discussed in great depth in the chapter devoted to each of the theorists.

Why focus on these theorists and not the innumerable others whose names and ideas will arise in the course of these first two chapters? The simplest answer to this question is that space limitations make it impossible to deal with all classical theorists. Beyond that, many theorists are not given full-chapter treatment because their theories do not belong to, or have centrally important roots in, the classical age. Furthermore, to be discussed in depth, theories must meet a series of other criteria. That is, to be included, theories must have a wide range of application (J. Turner and Boyns, 2001), must deal with centrally important social issues, and must have stood up well under the test of time (i.e., they must continue to be read and to be influential).1 Thus, a number of theorists who are briefly discussed in this chapter (e.g., Louis de Bonald) will not be discussed in detail later because their ideas do not meet one or more of the criteria previously listed, especially the fact that their theories have not stood the test of time. Our focus is on the important classical theoretical work of sociologists, as well as on work that has been done by those who are often associated with other fields (e.g., Karl Marx and his association with the field of economics) but that has come to be defined as important in sociology. To put it succinctly, this is a book about the “big ideas” in the history of sociology, ideas that deal with major social issues and are far-reaching in their scope.

In addition to the theorists previously mentioned, Chapters 10 and 11 are devoted to theorists whose ideas are only now being recognized as important contributors to sociological theory. Chapter 10 introduces a number of early female theorists—especially Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams, Ann Julia Cooper, Ida Wells-Barnett, Marianne Weber, and Beatrice Potter Webb. Chapter 11 covers African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. To be clear, it is not that these theorists are only now being discovered in sociology. The ideas developed by these thinkers were influential during their lifetime. However, over the course of the development of the twentieth century, their contributions were marginalized for reasons of gender and race. These figures are clearly classical thinkers who worked in the same time frame as the white, male theorists previously mentioned. In the main, their theories have a wide range of application and have certainly addressed centrally important issues. They were either sociologists or nonsociologists whose work was and is important in sociology.

Indeed, even though their contributions were overlooked for many years, some of these thinkers can rightfully be considered founding figures of the discipline. At the same time as Comte, Martineau was using the term sociology and developing one of the first sociological research methods. As such, in Chapter 10 Patricia Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge say that she should be described as the “founding mother” of sociology. Also, Earl Wright (2002) and Aldon Morris (2015) point out that in 1897, Du Bois established the first school of scientific sociology at Atlanta University and should therefore be considered the founder of American sociology, a status historically granted to faculty at the University of Chicago. As such, not only do these theorists introduce us to a set of “big ideas” but they also lead us to reflect on broader issues around science and the sociology of knowledge. How do people come to be included as members of a sociological canon?2 What are the social forces that determine inclusion and exclusion? And how do canons, and therefore
foundational ideas, change over time?

Presenting a history of sociological theory is an important task (S. P. Turner, 1998), but because we devote only the first two chapters to it, what we offer is a highly selective historical sketch. The idea is to provide the reader with a scaffolding that should help in putting the later detailed discussions of classical theorists into a larger context. As the reader proceeds through the later chapters, it will prove useful to return to these two overview chapters and place the discussions in that context. (It would be especially useful to glance back occasionally to Figures 1.1 and 2.1, which are schematic representations of the histories covered in those chapters.)

One cannot establish the precise date when sociological theory began. People have been thinking about and developing theories of social life since early in history. But we will not go back to the early historic times of the Greeks or Romans or even to the Middle Ages. We will not even go back to the seventeenth century, although Richard Olson (1993) has traced the sociological tradition to the mid-1600s and the work of James Harrington on the relationship between the economy and the polity. This is not because people in those epochs did not have sociologically relevant ideas, but because the return on our investment in time would be small; we would spend a lot of time getting very few ideas that are relevant to modern sociology. In any case, none of the thinkers associated with those eras thought of themselves, and few are now thought of, as sociologists. (For a discussion of one exception, see the biographical sketch of Ibn-Khaldun.) It is only in the 1800s that we begin to find thinkers who can be clearly identified as sociologists. These are the classical sociological thinkers we shall be interested in (Camic, 1997; for a debate about what makes theory classical, see R. Collins, 1997b; Connell, 1997), and we begin by examining the main social and intellectual forces that shaped their ideas.
Social Forces in the Development of Sociological Theory

All intellectual fields are profoundly shaped by their social settings. This is particularly true of sociology, which not only is derived from that setting but takes the social setting as its basic subject matter. We will focus briefly on a few of the most important social conditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conditions that were of the utmost significance in the development of sociology. We also will take the occasion to begin introducing the major figures in the history of sociological theory.

Political Revolutions

The long series of political revolutions ushered in by the French Revolution in 1789 and carrying over through the nineteenth century was the most immediate factor in the rise of sociological theorizing. The impact of these revolutions on many societies was enormous, and many positive changes resulted. However, what attracted the attention of many early theorists (especially Tocqueville) was not the positive consequences, but the negative effects of such changes. These writers were particularly disturbed by the resulting chaos and disorder, especially in France. They were united in a desire to restore order to society. Some of the more extreme thinkers of this period literally wanted a return to the peaceful and relatively orderly days of the Middle Ages. The more sophisticated thinkers recognized that social change had made such a return impossible. Thus, they sought instead to find new bases of order in societies that had been overturned by the political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This interest in the issue of social order was one of the major concerns of classical sociological theorists, especially Comte, Durkheim, and Parsons.

The Industrial Revolution and the Rise of Capitalism

At least as important as political revolution in the shaping of sociological theory was the Industrial Revolution, which swept through many Western societies, mainly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Industrial Revolution was not a single event but many interrelated developments that culminated in the transformation of the Western world from a largely agricultural system to an overwhelmingly industrial one. Large numbers of people left farms and agricultural work for the industrial occupations offered in the burgeoning factories. The factories themselves were transformed by a long series of technological improvements. Large economic bureaucracies arose to provide the many services needed by industry and the emerging capitalist economic system. In this economy, the ideal was a free marketplace where the many products of an industrial system could be exchanged. Within this system, a few profited greatly while the majority worked long hours for low wages. A reaction against the industrial system and against capitalism in general followed and led to the labor movement as well as to various radical movements aimed at overthrowing the capitalist system.
Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun: A Biographical Sketch

George Kollidas/Alamy Stock Photo

There is a tendency to think of sociology as exclusively a comparatively modern, Western phenomenon. In fact, however, scholars were developing sociological ideas and theories long ago and in other parts of the world. One example is Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun.

Ibn-Khaldun was born in Tunis, North Africa, on May 27, 1332 (Alatas, 2011, 2014; Faghirzadeh, 1982). Born to an educated family, Ibn-Khaldun was schooled in the Koran (the Muslim holy book), mathematics, and history. In his lifetime, he served a variety of sultans in Tunis, Morocco, Spain, and Algeria as ambassador, chamberlain, and member of the scholars’ council. He also spent two years in prison in Morocco for his belief that state rulers were not divine leaders. After approximately two decades of political activity, Ibn-Khaldun returned to North Africa, where he undertook an intensive five-year period of study and writing. Works produced during this period increased his fame and led to a lectureship at the center of Islamic study, Al-Azhar Mosque University in Cairo. In his well-attended lectures on society and sociology, Ibn-Khaldun stressed the importance of linking sociological thought and historical observation.

By the time he died in 1406, Ibn-Khaldun had produced a corpus of work that had many ideas in common with contemporary sociology. As described in his *Muqaddimah*, Ibn-Khaldun was committed to the scientific study of society, empirical research, and the search for causes of social phenomena. He devoted considerable attention to various social institutions (e.g., politics, economy) and their interrelationships. He was interested in comparing primitive and modern societies.

One particular topic that Ibn-Khaldun studied was state formation. He argued that “the rise and decline of North African states lay in the essential differences in social organization between pastoral nomadic and sedentary societies” (Alatas, 2011:15). Relying on the concept of *‘asabiyyah*, Ibn-Khaldun developed a cyclical theory of state formation. *‘Asabiyyah* refers to a group’s feeling of solidarity or social cohesion. It comes from a shared knowledge of common descent. Nomadic groups had a high level of *‘asabiyyah* and therefore “could defeat sedentary people in urban areas and establish their own dynasties” (15). However, once nomadic groups settled, they would lose *‘asabiyyah* and become vulnerable to “attack by another group of nomads with superior *‘asabiyyah*” (15).
There are interesting similarities and differences between Ibn-Khaldun’s ideas and later sociological theories. On the one hand, Ibn-Khaldun's ‘asabiyyah anticipates the concept of social cohesion in the work of theorists like Emile Durkheim, four hundred years later. On the other hand, Ibn-Khaldun’s description of historical cycles strongly contrasts with the focus on linear and progressive social development assumed by many of the classical theorists.

Ibn-Khaldun did not have a dramatic impact on classical sociology, but as scholars in general, and Islamic scholars in particular, rediscover his work, he may come to be seen as being of greater historical significance.

The Industrial Revolution, capitalism, and the reaction against them all involved an enormous upheaval in Western society, an upheaval that affected sociologists greatly. Five major figures in the early history of sociological theory—Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Thorstein Veblen—were preoccupied, as were many other thinkers, with these changes and the problems they created for society as a whole. They spent their lives studying these problems, and in many cases they endeavored to develop programs that would help solve them.

Colonialism

A key force in the development of modern, capitalist societies was colonialism, which ”refers to the direct political control of a society and its people by a foreign ruling state” (Go, 2007:602). In some cases colonialism led to “colonization,” which was when foreign nations established permanent settlements in a colonial possession (602). An example is the North American colonies, which became the nations of the United States and Canada. Colonialism emerged in the fifteenth century when Portugal established trading colonies in Asia and Spain violently plundered South America. This was followed by a period of colonial expansion by the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, and France and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (MacQueen, 2007).

In addition to being a political relationship, colonialism also had economic, social, and cultural aspects (Go, 2007). Colonies were a source of wealth for European nations. In Capital, Karl Marx argued that the development of capitalism was fueled by the “primitive accumulation” of gold and silver in the colonies (1867/1967:351). Moreover, once the Industrial Revolution was further advanced, colonies became stable sources of raw materials, such as the cotton used in textile manufacture. These materials were farmed on plantations, by African slaves, who had been brought to the Caribbean and North America to support colonial development. Colonialism also shaped European identity. Modern racism developed as European nations attempted to legitimize their domination of African and indigenous populations. Scientific theories, such as Social Darwinism, proposed hierarchies of racial superiority, and Europeans contrasted their civilized societies to the so-called uncivilized, savage, and barbaric societies of colonized peoples.

Although colonialism, and the ideas shaped by colonialism, served as an often unacknowledged backdrop to the development of sociological theory (see Steinmetz [2013] and Connell [2007] for thorough treatments and R. Collins [1997b] for a dissenting view), few of the theorists covered in this book seriously discuss colonialism. There are exceptions. The earliest theorists covered in this text (Tocqueville, Comte, Spencer, and Martineau) wrote about colonialism. Both Tocqueville and Martineau traveled widely: to America (Tocqueville, Martineau), Algeria (Tocqueville) and India (Martineau). Each was very critical of the
American treatment of slaves and indigenous people, though, in contradiction of this, Tocqueville was a strong advocate for French colonialism in Algeria. Mostly, Spencer was critical of colonialism. Though he saw colonized people as “inferior races,” he objected to the militarism and violence of colonial conquest (Connell, 2007:17; Francis, 2011). Marx, as noted, described the role that colonies played in the primitive accumulation of capital. Although he didn’t directly address colonialism, Durkheim regularly compared modern Western society to the non-Western, “primitive” societies described by anthropologists of the time. Weber wrote at length about imperialism and supported German imperialism, though, as George Steinmetz (2013) pointed out, he didn’t comment much on colonialism. As an extension of his critique of American race relations, Du Bois wrote extensively and critically about the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and race.

The Rise of Socialism

One set of changes aimed at coping with the excesses of the industrial system and capitalism can be combined under the heading “socialism” (Beilharz, 2005d). Although some sociologists favored socialism as a solution to industrial problems, most were personally and intellectually opposed to it. On the one side, Karl Marx was an active supporter of the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement by a socialist system. Although Marx did not develop a theory of socialism per se, he spent a great deal of time criticizing various aspects of capitalist society. In addition, he engaged in a variety of political activities that he hoped would help bring about the rise of socialist societies.

However, Marx was atypical in the early years of sociological theory. Most of the early theorists, such as Weber and Durkheim, were opposed to socialism (at least as it was envisioned by Marx). Although they recognized the problems within capitalist society, they sought social reform within capitalism rather than the social revolution argued for by Marx. They feared socialism (as did Tocqueville) more than they did capitalism. This fear played a far greater role in shaping sociological theory than did Marx’s support of the socialist alternative to capitalism. In fact, as we will see, in many cases sociological theory developed in reaction *against* Marxian and, more generally, socialist theory.

Feminism

In one sense there has always been a feminist perspective. Whenever and wherever women are subordinated—and they have been subordinated almost always and everywhere—they recognize and protest that situation in some form (G. Lerner, 1993). Although precursors can be traced to the 1630s, high points of feminist activity and writing occurred in the liberationist moments of modern Western history: a first flurry of productivity in the 1780s and 1790s with the debates surrounding the American and French revolutions; a far more organized, focused effort in the 1850s as part of the mobilization against slavery and for political rights for the middle class; and the massive mobilization for women’s suffrage and for industrial and civic reform legislation in the early twentieth century, especially the Progressive Era in the United States.

All of this had an impact on the development of sociology, in particular on the work of a number of women in or associated with the field—Harriet Martineau (Vetter, 2008), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells-Barnett, Marianne Weber, and Beatrice Potter Webb, to
name just a few. But, over time, their creations were pushed to the periphery of the profession, annexed or discounted or written out of sociology’s public record by the men who were organizing sociology as a professional power base. Feminist concerns filtered into sociology only on the margins, in the work of marginal male theorists or of the increasingly marginalized female theorists. The men who assumed centrality in the profession—from Spencer, through Weber and Durkheim—made basically conservative responses to the feminist arguments going on around them, making issues of gender an inconsequential topic to which they responded conventionally rather than critically in what they identified and publicly promoted as sociology. They responded in this way even as women were writing a significant body of sociological theory. The history of this gender politics in the profession, which is also part of the history of male response to feminist claims, is only now being written (e.g., see Deegan, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1990; Gordon, 1994; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998; R. Rosenberg, 1982).

**Urbanization**

Partly as a result of the Industrial Revolution, large numbers of people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were uprooted from their rural homes and moved to urban settings. This massive migration was caused, in large part, by the jobs created by the industrial system in the urban areas. But it presented many difficulties for those people who had to adjust to urban life. In addition, the expansion of the cities produced a seemingly endless list of urban problems, including overcrowding, pollution, noise, and traffic. The nature of urban life and its problems attracted the attention of many early sociologists, especially Max Weber and Georg Simmel. In fact, the first major school of American sociology, the Chicago school, was in large part defined by its concern for the city and its interest in using Chicago as a laboratory in which to study urbanization and its problems.

**Religious Change**

Social changes brought on by political revolutions, the Industrial Revolution, and urbanization had a profound effect on religiosity. Many early sociologists came from religious backgrounds and were actively, and in some cases professionally, involved in religion (Hinkle and Hinkle, 1954). They brought to sociology the same objectives as they had in their religious lives. They wanted to improve people’s lives (Vidich and Lyman, 1985). For some (such as Comte), sociology was transformed into a religion. For others, their sociological theories bore an unmistakable religious imprint. Durkheim wrote one of his major works on religion. Morality played a key role not only in Durkheim’s sociology but also in the work of Talcott Parsons. A large portion of Weber’s work also was devoted to the religions of the world. Marx, too, had an interest in religiosity, but his orientation was far more critical. Spencer discussed religion (“ecclesiastical institutions”) as a significant component of society.

**The Growth of Science**

As sociological theory was being developed, there was an increasing emphasis on science, not only in colleges and universities but in society as a whole. The technological products of science were permeating every sector of life, and science was acquiring enormous prestige. Those associated with the most successful sciences
(physics, biology, and chemistry) were accorded honored places in society. Sociologists (especially Comte, Durkheim, Spencer, Mead, and Schutz) from the beginning were preoccupied with science, and many wanted to model sociology after the successful physical and biological sciences. However, a debate soon developed between those who wholeheartedly accepted the scientific model and those (such as Weber) who thought that distinctive characteristics of social life made a wholesale adoption of a scientific model difficult and unwise (Lepenies, 1988). The issue of the relationship between sociology and science is debated to this day, although even a glance at the major journals in the field, at least in the United States, indicates the predominance of those who favor sociology as a science.
Intellectual Forces and the Rise of Sociological Theory

Although social factors are important, the primary focus of this chapter is the intellectual forces that played a central role in shaping sociological theory. In the real world, of course, intellectual factors cannot be separated from social forces. For example, in the discussion of the Enlightenment that follows, we will find that that movement was intimately related to, and in many cases provided the intellectual basis for, the social changes discussed earlier in this chapter.

The many intellectual forces that shaped the development of social theories are discussed within the national context in which their influence was primarily felt (D. Levine, 1995b; Rundell, 2001). We begin with the Enlightenment and its influences on the development of sociological theory in France.

The Enlightenment

It is the view of many observers that the Enlightenment constitutes a critical development in terms of the later evolution of sociology (Hawthorn, 1976; Hughes, Martin, and Sharrock, 1995; Nisbet, 1967; Zeitlin, 1996). The Enlightenment was a period of remarkable intellectual development and change in philosophical thought. A number of long-standing ideas and beliefs—many of which related to social life—were overthrown and replaced during the Enlightenment. The most prominent thinkers associated with the Enlightenment were the French philosophers Charles Montesquieu (1689–1755) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) (B. Singer, 2005a, 2005b). The influence of the Enlightenment on sociological theory, however, was more indirect and negative than it was direct and positive. As Irving Zeitlin put it, “Early sociology developed as a reaction to the Enlightenment” (1996:10).

The thinkers associated with the Enlightenment were influenced, above all, by two intellectual currents—seventeenth-century philosophy and science.

Seventeenth-century philosophy was associated with the work of thinkers such as René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. The emphasis was on producing grand, general, and very abstract systems of ideas that made rational sense. The later thinkers associated with the Enlightenment did not reject the idea that systems of ideas should be general and should make rational sense, but they did make greater efforts to derive their ideas from the real world and to test them there. In other words, they wanted to combine empirical research with reason (Seidman, 1983:36–37). The model for this was science, especially Newtonian physics. At this point, we see the emergence of the application of the scientific method to social issues. Not only did Enlightenment thinkers want their ideas to be, at least in part, derived from the real world, they also wanted them to be useful to the social world, especially in the critical analysis of that world.

Overall, the Enlightenment was characterized by the belief that people could comprehend and control the universe by means of reason and empirical research. The view was that because the physical world was dominated by natural laws, it was likely that the social world was, too. Thus, it was up to the philosopher, using reason and research, to discover these social laws. After they understood how the social world worked, the Enlightenment thinkers had a practical goal—the creation of a “better,” more rational world.
With an emphasis on reason, the Enlightenment philosophers were inclined to reject beliefs in traditional authority. When these thinkers examined traditional values and institutions, they often found them to be irrational—that is, contrary to human nature and inhibitive of human growth and development. The mission of the practical and change-oriented philosophers of the Enlightenment was to overcome these irrational systems. The theorists who were most directly and positively influenced by Enlightenment thinking were Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx, although the latter formed his early theoretical ideas in Germany.

The Conservative Reaction to the Enlightenment

On the surface, we might think that French classical sociological theory, like Marx’s theory, was directly and positively influenced by the Enlightenment. French sociology became rational, empirical, scientific, and change-oriented, but not before it was also shaped by a set of ideas that developed in reaction to the Enlightenment. In Steven Seidman’s view, “The ideology of the counter-Enlightenment represented a virtual inversion of Enlightenment liberalism. In place of modernist premises, we can detect in the Enlightenment critics a strong anti-modernist sentiment” (1983:51). As we will see, sociology in general, and French sociology in particular, has from the beginning been an uncomfortable mix of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment ideas.

The most extreme form of opposition to Enlightenment ideas was French Catholic counterrevolutionary philosophy (Reedy, 1994), as represented by the ideas of Louis de Bonald (1754–1840) (Bradley, 2005a) and Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) (Bradley, 2005b). These men were reacting against not only the Enlightenment but also the French Revolution, which they saw partly as a product of the kind of thinking characteristic of the Enlightenment. De Bonald, for example, was disturbed by the revolutionary changes and yearned for a return to the peace and harmony of the Middle Ages. In this view, God was the source of society; therefore, reason, which was so important to the Enlightenment philosophers, was seen as inferior to traditional religious beliefs. Furthermore, it was believed that because God had created society, people should not tamper with it and should not try to change a holy creation. By extension, de Bonald opposed anything that undermined such traditional institutions as patriarchy, the monogamous family, the monarchy, and the Catholic Church.

Although de Bonald represented a rather extreme form of the conservative reaction, his work constitutes a useful introduction to its general premises. The conservatives turned away from what they considered the “naive” rationalism of the Enlightenment. They not only recognized the irrational aspects of social life but also assigned them positive value. Thus, they regarded such phenomena as tradition, imagination, emotionalism, and religion as useful and necessary components of social life. In that they disliked upheaval and sought to retain the existing order, they deplored developments such as the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, which they saw as disruptive forces. The conservatives tended to emphasize social order, an emphasis that became one of the central themes of the work of several sociological theorists.

Zeitlin (1996) outlined ten major propositions that he saw as emerging from the conservative reaction and providing the basis for the development of classical French sociological theory.
1. Whereas Enlightenment thinkers tended to emphasize the individual, the conservative reaction led to a major sociological interest in, and emphasis on, society and other large-scale phenomena. Society was viewed as something more than simply an aggregate of individuals. Society was seen as having an existence of its own with its own laws of development and deep roots in the past.

2. Society was the most important unit of analysis; it was seen as more important than the individual. It was society that produced the individual, primarily through the process of socialization.

3. The individual was not seen as the most basic element within society. A society consisted of such component parts as roles, positions, relationships, structures, and institutions. Individuals were seen as doing little more than filling these units within society.

4. The parts of society were seen as interrelated and interdependent. Indeed, these interrelationships were a major basis of society. This view led to a conservative political orientation. That is, because the parts were held to be interrelated, it followed that tampering with one part could well lead to the undermining of other parts and, ultimately, of the system as a whole. This meant that changes in the social system should be made with extreme care.

5. Change was seen as a threat not only to society and its components but also to the individuals in society. The various components of society were seen as satisfying people’s needs. When institutions were disrupted, people were likely to suffer, and their suffering was likely to lead to social disorder.

6. The general tendency was to see the various large-scale components of society as useful for both society and the individuals in it. As a result, there was little desire to look for the negative effects of existing social structures and social institutions.

7. Small units, such as the family, the neighborhood, and religious and occupational groups, also were seen as essential to individuals and society. They provided the intimate, face-to-face environments that people needed in order to survive in modern societies.

8. There was a tendency to see various modern social changes, such as industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization, as having disorganizing effects. These changes were viewed with fear and anxiety, and there was an emphasis on developing ways of dealing with their disruptive effects.

9. Whereas most of these feared changes were leading to a more rational society, the conservative reaction led to an emphasis on the importance of nonrational factors (e.g., ritual, ceremony, and worship) in social life.

10. Finally, the conservatives supported the existence of a hierarchical system in society. It was seen as important to society that there be a differential system of status and reward.

These ten propositions, derived from the conservative reaction to the Enlightenment, should be seen as the immediate intellectual basis of the development of sociological theory in France. Many of these ideas made their way into early sociological thought, although some of the Enlightenment ideas (e.g., empiricism) were also influential.
The Development of French Sociology

We turn now to the actual founding of sociology as a distinctive discipline—specifically, to the work of four French thinkers: Alexis de Tocqueville, Claude Henri Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, and, especially, Emile Durkheim.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859)

We begin with Alexis de Tocqueville even though he was born after both Saint-Simon and Comte. We do so because he and his work were such pure products of the Enlightenment discussed earlier (he was strongly and directly influenced by Montesquieu [B. Singer, 2004], especially his *The Spirit of the Laws* [1748]) and because his work was not part of the clear line of development in French social theory from Saint-Simon and Comte to the crucially important Durkheim. Tocqueville has long been seen as a political scientist, not a sociologist, and many have not perceived the existence of a social theory in his work (e.g., Seidman, 1983:306). However, not only is there a social theory in his work, but it is one that deserves a much more significant place in the history of social theory.

Tocqueville is best known for the legendary and highly influential *Democracy in America* (1835–1840/1969), especially the first volume that deals, in a very laudatory way, with the early American democratic system and that came to be seen as an early contribution to the development of “political science.” However, in the later volumes of that work, as well as in later works, Tocqueville clearly developed a broad social theory that deserves a place in the canon of social theory.

Three interrelated issues lie at the heart of Tocqueville’s theory. As a product of the Enlightenment, he was first and foremost a great supporter of, and advocate for, freedom. He was much more critical of equality, which he saw as tending to produce mediocrity in comparison to better political and cultural products produced by the aristocrats (he was, himself, an aristocrat) of a prior, less egalitarian era. More importantly, it is also linked to what most concerned him, and that is the growth of centralization, especially in the government, and the threat centralized government poses to freedom. In his view, it was the inequality of the prior age, the power of the aristocrats, which acted to keep government centralization in check. However, with the demise of aristocrats and the rise of greater equality, there were no groups capable of countering the ever-present tendency toward centralization. The mass of largely equal people were too “servile” to oppose this trend. Furthermore, Tocqueville linked equality to “individualism” (an important concept he claimed to “invent” and for which he is credited), and the resulting individualists were far less interested in the well-being of the larger “community” than the aristocrats that preceded them.

It is for this reason that Tocqueville was critical of democracy and especially socialism. Democracy’s commitment to freedom is ultimately threatened by its parallel commitment to equality and its tendency toward centralized government. Of course, from Tocqueville’s point of view, the situation would be far worse in socialism because its far greater commitment to equality, and the much greater likelihood of government centralization, poses more of a threat to freedom. The latter view is quite prescient given what transpired in
the Soviet Union and other societies that operated, at least in name, under the banner of socialism.

Thus, the strength of Tocqueville’s theory lies in the interrelated ideas of freedom, equality, and, especially, centralization. His “grand narrative” on the increasing control of central governments anticipated other theories, including Weber’s work on bureaucracy and the more contemporary work of Michel Foucault on “governmentality” and its gradual spread, increasing subtlety, and propensity to invade even the “soul” of the people controlled by it.

**Claude Henri Saint-Simon (1760–1825)**

Saint-Simon was older than Auguste Comte; in fact, Comte, in his early years, served as Saint-Simon’s secretary and disciple. There is a very strong similarity between the ideas of these two thinkers, yet a bitter debate developed between them that led to their eventual split (Pickering, 1993; Thompson, 1975).

The most interesting aspect of Saint-Simon was his significance to the development of both conservative (like Comte’s) and radical Marxian theory. On the conservative side, Saint-Simon wanted to preserve society as it was, but he did not seek a return to life as it had been in the Middle Ages, as did de Bonald and de Maistre. In addition, he was a positivist (Durkheim, 1928/1962:142), which meant that he believed that the study of social phenomena should employ the same scientific techniques as those used in the natural sciences. On the radical side, Saint-Simon saw the need for socialist reforms, especially the centralized planning of the economic system. But Saint-Simon did not go nearly as far as Marx did later. Although he, like Marx, saw the capitalists superseding the feudal nobility, he felt it inconceivable that the working class would come to replace the capitalists. Many of Saint-Simon’s ideas are found in Comte’s work, but Comte developed them in a more systematic fashion (Pickering, 1997).

**Auguste Comte (1798–1857)**

Comte (see Chapter 4) was the first to use the term sociology (Pickering, 2011; J. Turner, 2001a). He had an enormous influence on later sociological theorists (especially Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim). And he believed that the study of sociology should be scientific, just as many classical theorists did and most contemporary sociologists do (Lenzer, 1975).

Comte was greatly disturbed by the anarchy that pervaded French society and was critical of those thinkers who had spawned both the Enlightenment and the revolution. He developed his scientific view, positivism, or positive philosophy, to combat what he considered to be the negative and destructive philosophy of the Enlightenment. Comte was in line with, and influenced by, the French counterrevolutionary Catholics (especially de Bonald and de Maistre). However, his work can be set apart from theirs on at least two grounds. First, he did not think it possible to return to the Middle Ages; advances in science and industry made that impossible. Second, he developed a much more sophisticated theoretical system than his predecessors, one that was adequate to shape a good portion of early sociology.

Comte developed social physics, or what in 1839 he called sociology (Pickering, 2011). The use of the term social physics made it clear that Comte sought to model sociology after the “hard sciences.” This new science, which
in his view would ultimately become the dominant science, was to be concerned with social statics (existing social structures) and social dynamics (social change). Although both involved the search for laws of social life, he felt that social dynamics was more important than social statics. This focus on change reflected his interest in social reform, particularly reform of the ills created by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Comte did not urge revolutionary change, because he felt the natural evolution of society would make things better. Reforms were needed only to assist the process a bit.

This leads us to the cornerstone of Comte’s approach—his evolutionary theory, or the law of the three stages. The theory proposes that there are three intellectual stages through which the world has gone throughout its history. According to Comte, not only does the world go through this process, but groups, societies, sciences, individuals, and even minds go through the same three stages. The theological stage is the first, and it characterized the world prior to 1300. During this period, the major idea system emphasized the belief that supernatural powers and religious figures, modeled after humankind, are at the root of everything. In particular, the social and physical world is seen as produced by God. The second stage is the metaphysical stage, which occurred roughly between 1300 and 1800. This era was characterized by the belief that abstract forces like “nature,” rather than personalized gods, explain virtually everything. Finally, in 1800 the world entered the positivistic stage, characterized by belief in science. People now tended to give up the search for absolute causes (God or nature) and concentrated instead on observation of the social and physical world in the search for the laws governing them.

It is clear that in his theory of the world, Comte focused on intellectual factors. Indeed, he argued that intellectual disorder is the cause of social disorder. The disorder stemmed from earlier idea systems (theological and metaphysical) that continued to exist in the positivistic (scientific) age. Only when positivism gained total control would social upheavals cease. Because this was an evolutionary process, there was no need to foment social upheaval and revolution. Positivism would come, although perhaps not as quickly as some would like. Here Comte’s social reformism and his sociology coincide. Sociology could expedite the arrival of positivism and hence bring order to the social world. Above all, Comte did not want to seem to be espousing revolution. There was, in his view, enough disorder in the world. In any case, from Comte’s point of view, it was intellectual change that was needed, so there was little reason for social and political revolution.

We have already encountered several of Comte’s positions that were to be of great significance to the development of classical sociology—his basic conservatism, reformism, and scientism and his evolutionary view of the world. Several other aspects of his work deserve mention because they also were to play a major role in the development of sociological theory. For example, his sociology does not focus on the individual but rather takes as its basic unit of analysis larger entities such as the family. He also urged that we look at both social structure and social change. Of great importance to later sociological theory, especially the work of Spencer and Parsons, is Comte’s stress on the systematic character of society—the links among and between the various components of society. He also accorded great importance to the role of consensus in society. He saw little merit in the idea that society is characterized by inevitable conflict between workers and capitalists. In addition, Comte emphasized the need to engage in abstract theorizing and to go out and do sociological research. He urged that sociologists use observation, experimentation, and comparative historical analysis.
Finally, Comte believed that sociology ultimately would become the dominant scientific force in the world because of its distinctive ability to interpret social laws and to develop reforms aimed at patching up problems within the system.

Comte was in the forefront of the development of positivistic sociology (Bryant, 1985; Halfpenny, 1982). To Jonathan Turner, Comte’s positivism emphasized that “the social universe is amenable to the development of abstract laws that can be tested through the careful collection of data,” and “these abstract laws will denote the basic and generic properties of the social universe and they will specify their ‘natural relations’” (1985:24). As we will see, a number of classical theorists (especially Spencer and Durkheim) shared Comte’s interest in the discovery of the laws of social life. Even though Comte lacked a solid academic base on which to build a school of Comtian sociological theory, he nevertheless laid a basis for the development of a significant stream of sociological theory. But his long-term significance is dwarfed by that of his successor in French sociology and the inheritor of a number of its ideas, Emile Durkheim. (For a debate over the canonization of Durkheim, as well as other classical theorists discussed in this chapter, see Mouzelis, 1997; Parker, 1997.)

**Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)**

Durkheim’s relation to the Enlightenment was much more ambiguous than Comte’s. He has been seen as an inheritor of the Enlightenment tradition because of his emphasis on science and social reformism. However, Durkheim also has been seen as the inheritor of the conservative tradition, especially as it was manifested in Comte’s work. But whereas Comte had remained outside of academia as had Tocqueville, Durkheim developed an increasingly solid academic base as his career progressed. Durkheim legitimized sociology in France, and his work ultimately became a dominant force in the development of sociology in general and of sociological theory in particular (Milbrandt and Pearce, 2011; Rawls, 2007).

Durkheim was politically liberal, but he took a more conservative position intellectually. Like Comte and the Catholic counterrevolutionaries, Durkheim feared and hated social disorder. His work was informed by the disorders produced by the general social changes discussed earlier in this chapter, as well as by others (such as industrial strikes, disruption of the ruling class, church–state discord, the rise of political anti-Semitism) more specific to the France of Durkheim’s time (Karady, 1983). In fact, most of his work was devoted to the study of social order. His view was that social disorders are not a necessary part of the modern world and could be reduced by social reforms. Whereas Marx saw the problems of the modern world as inherent in society, Durkheim (along with most other classical theorists) did not. As a result, Marx’s ideas on the need for social revolution stood in sharp contrast to the reformism of Durkheim and the others. As classical sociological theory developed, it was the Durkheimian interest on order and reform that came to dominate, while the Marxian position was eclipsed.

**Social Facts**

Durkheim developed a distinctive conception of the subject matter of sociology and then tested it in an empirical study. In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895/1982), Durkheim argued that it is the special task of sociology to study what he called *social facts*. He conceived of social facts as forces (Takla and Pape, 1985) and
structures that are external to, and coercive of, the individual. The study of these large-scale structures and forces—for example, institutionalized law and shared moral beliefs—and their impact on people became the concern of many later sociological theorists (e.g., Parsons). In Suicide (1897/1951), Durkheim reasoned that if he could link an individual behavior such as suicide to social causes (social facts), he would have made a persuasive case for the importance of the discipline of sociology. His basic argument was that it was the nature of and changes in social facts that led to differences in suicide rates. For example, a war or an economic depression would create a collective mood of depression that would in turn lead to increases in suicide rates.

In The Rules of Sociological Method, Durkheim differentiated between two types of social facts—material and nonmaterial. Although he dealt with both in the course of his work, his main focus was on nonmaterial social facts (e.g., culture, social institutions) rather than material social facts (e.g., bureaucracy, law). This concern for nonmaterial social facts was already clear in his earliest major work, The Division of Labor in Society (1893/1964). His focus there was a comparative analysis of what held society together in the primitive and modern cases. He concluded that earlier societies were held together primarily by nonmaterial social facts, specifically, a strongly held common morality, or what he called a strong collective conscience. However, because of the complexities of modern society, there had been a decline in the strength of the collective conscience. The primary bond in the modern world was an intricate division of labor, which tied people to others in dependency relationships. However, Durkheim believed that the modern division of labor brought with it several “pathologies”; it was, in other words, an inadequate method of holding society together. Given his conservative sociology, Durkheim did not feel that revolution was needed to solve these problems. Rather, he suggested a variety of reforms that could “patch up” the modern system and keep it functioning. Although he recognized that there was no going back to the age when a powerful collective conscience predominated, he did think that the common morality could be strengthened in modern society and that people thereby could cope better with the pathologies that they were experiencing.

Religion

In Durkheim’s later work, nonmaterial social facts occupied an even more central position. In fact, he came to focus on perhaps the ultimate form of a nonmaterial social fact—religion—in his last major work, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912/1965). Durkheim examined primitive society to find the roots of religion. He believed that he would be better able to find those roots in the comparative simplicity of primitive society than in the complexity of the modern world. What he found, he felt, was that the source of religion was society itself. Society comes to define certain things as religious and others as profane. Specifically, in the case he studied, the clan was the source of a primitive kind of religion, totemism, in which things such as plants and animals are deified. Totemism, in turn, was seen as a specific type of nonmaterial social fact, a form of the collective conscience. In the end, Durkheim came to argue that society and religion (or, more generally, the collective conscience) were one and the same. Religion was the way society expressed itself in the form of a nonmaterial social fact. In a sense, then, Durkheim came to deify society and its major products. Clearly, in deifying society, Durkheim took a highly conservative stance: one would not want to overturn a deity or its societal source.
These books and other important works helped carve out a distinctive domain for sociology in the academic world of turn-of-the-century France, and they earned Durkheim the leading position in that growing field. In 1898, Durkheim set up a scholarly journal devoted to sociology, *L'Année sociologique* (Besnard, 1983). It became a powerful force in the development and spread of sociological ideas. Durkheim was intent on fostering the growth of sociology, and he used his journal as a focal point for the development of a group of disciples. They later would extend his ideas and carry them to many other locales and into the study of other aspects of the social world (e.g., sociology of law and sociology of the city) (Besnard, 1983). By 1910, Durkheim had established a strong center of sociology in France, and the academic institutionalization of sociology was well under way in that nation (Heilbron, 1995).
The Development of German Sociology

Whereas the early history of French sociology is a fairly coherent story of the progression from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to the conservative reaction and to the increasingly important sociological ideas of Tocqueville, Saint-Simon, Comte, and Durkheim, German sociology was fragmented from the beginning. A split developed between Marx (and his supporters), who remained on the edge of sociology, and the early giants of mainstream German sociology, Max Weber and Georg Simmel. However, although Marxian theory itself was deemed unacceptable, its ideas found their way in a variety of positive and negative ways into mainstream German sociology.

The Roots and Nature of the Theories of Karl Marx (1818–1883)

The dominant intellectual influence on Karl Marx was the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).

Hegel

According to Terence Ball, “it is difficult for us to appreciate the degree to which Hegel dominated German thought in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. It was largely within the framework of his philosophy that educated Germans—including the young Marx—discussed history, politics and culture” (1991:125).

Marx's education at the University of Berlin was shaped by Hegel's ideas as well as by the split that developed among Hegel's followers after his death. The “Old Hegelians” continued to subscribe to the master's ideas, whereas the “Young Hegelians,” although still working in the Hegelian tradition, were critical of many facets of his philosophical system.

Two concepts represent the essence of Hegel's philosophy—the dialectic and idealism (Beamish, 2007; Hegel, 1807/1967, 1821/1967). The dialectic is both a way of thinking and an image of the world. On the one hand, it is a way of thinking that stresses the importance of processes, relations, dynamics, conflicts, and contradictions—a dynamic rather than a static way of thinking about the world. On the other hand, it is a view that the world is made up not of static structures but of processes, relationships, dynamics, conflicts, and contradictions. Although the dialectic generally is associated with Hegel, it certainly predates him in philosophy. Marx, trained in the Hegelian tradition, accepted the significance of the dialectic. However, he was critical of some aspects of the way Hegel used it. For example, Hegel tended to apply the dialectic only to ideas, whereas Marx felt that it applied as well to more material aspects of life—for example, the economy.

Hegel is also associated with the philosophy of idealism (Kleiner, 2005), which emphasizes the importance of the mind and mental products rather than the material world. It is the social definition of the physical and material worlds that matters most, not those worlds themselves. In its extreme form, idealism asserts that only the mind and psychological constructs exist. Some idealists believed that their mental processes would remain the same even if the physical and social worlds no longer existed. Idealists emphasize not only mental processes but also the ideas produced by these processes. Hegel paid a great deal of attention to the development of such ideas, especially to what he referred to as the “spirit” of society.
In fact, Hegel offered a kind of evolutionary theory of the world in idealistic terms. At first, people were endowed only with the ability to acquire a sensory understanding of the world around them. They could understand things like the sight, smell, and feel of the social and physical world. Later, people developed the ability to be conscious of, to understand, themselves. With self-knowledge and self-understanding, people began to understand that they could become more than they were. In terms of Hegel's dialectical approach, a contradiction developed between what people were and what they felt they could be. The resolution of this contradiction lay in the development of an individual’s awareness of his or her place in the larger spirit of society. Individuals come to realize that their ultimate fulfillment lies in the development and the expansion of the spirit of society as a whole. Thus, individuals in Hegel’s scheme evolve from an understanding of things to an understanding of self to an understanding of their place in the larger scheme of things.

Hegel, then, offered a general theory of the evolution of the world. It is a subjective theory in which change is held to occur at the level of consciousness. However, that change occurs largely beyond the control of actors. Actors are reduced to little more than vessels swept along by the inevitable evolution of consciousness.

Feuerbach

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) was an important bridge between Hegel and Marx. As a Young Hegelian, Feuerbach was critical of Hegel for, among other things, his excessive emphasis on consciousness and the spirit of society. Feuerbach's adoption of a materialist philosophy led him to argue that what was needed was to move from Hegel's subjective idealism to a focus not on ideas but on the material reality of real human beings. In his critique of Hegel, Feuerbach focused on religion. To Feuerbach, God is simply a projection by people of their human essence onto an impersonal force. People set God over and above themselves, with the result that they become alienated from God and project a series of positive characteristics onto God (that He is perfect, almighty, and holy), while they reduce themselves to being imperfect, powerless, and sinful. Feuerbach argued that this kind of religion must be overcome and that its defeat could be aided by a materialist philosophy in which people (not religion) became their own highest object, ends in themselves. Real people, not abstract ideas like religion, are deified by a materialist philosophy.

Marx, Hegel, and Feuerbach

Marx was simultaneously influenced by and critical of both Hegel and Feuerbach (Staples, 2007). Marx, following Feuerbach, was critical of Hegel's adherence to an idealist philosophy. Marx took this position not only because of his adoption of a materialist orientation but also because of his interest in practical activities. Social facts such as wealth and the state are treated by Hegel as ideas rather than as real, material entities. Even when he examined a seemingly material process such as labor, Hegel was looking only at abstract mental labor. This is very different from Marx’s interest in the labor of real, sentient people. Thus, Hegel was looking at the wrong issues as far as Marx was concerned. In addition, Marx felt that Hegel's idealism led to a very conservative political orientation. To Hegel, the process of evolution was occurring beyond the control of people and their activities. Because people seemed to be moving toward greater consciousness of the world as it could be, there seemed no need for any revolutionary change; the process was already moving in the “desired” direction.
Marx took a very different position, arguing that the problems of modern life can be traced to real, material sources (e.g., the structures of capitalism) and that the solutions, therefore, can be found only in the overturning of those structures by the collective action of large numbers of people (Marx and Engels, 1845/1956:254). Whereas Hegel “stood the world on its head” (i.e., focused on consciousness, not the real, material world), Marx firmly embedded his dialectic in a material base.

Marx applauded Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel on a number of counts (e.g., its materialism and its rejection of the abstractness of Hegel’s theory), but he was far from fully satisfied with Feuerbach’s position (Thomson, 1994). For one thing, Feuerbach focused on the religious world, whereas Marx believed that it was the entire social world, and the economy in particular, that had to be analyzed. Although Marx accepted Feuerbach’s materialism, he felt that Feuerbach had gone too far in focusing one-sidedly, nondialectically, on the material world. Feuerbach failed to include the most important of Hegel’s contributions, the dialectic, in his materialist orientation, particularly the relationship between people and the material world. Finally, Marx argued that Feuerbach, like most philosophers, failed to emphasize *praxis*—practical activity—in particular, revolutionary activity (Wortmann, 2007). As Marx put it, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (cited in Tucker, 1970:109).

Marx extracted what he considered to be the two most important elements from these two thinkers—Hegel’s dialectic and Feuerbach’s materialism—and fused them into his own distinctive orientation, *dialectical materialism,* which focuses on dialectical relationships within the material world.

**Political Economy**

Marx’s materialism and his consequent focus on the economic sector led him rather naturally to the work of a group of political economists (e.g., Adam Smith and David Ricardo [Howard and King, 2005]). Marx was very attracted to a number of their positions. He lauded their basic premise that labor was the source of all wealth. This ultimately led Marx to his *labor theory of value,* in which he argued that the profit of the capitalist was based on the exploitation of the laborer. Capitalists performed the rather simple trick of paying the workers less than they deserved, because they received less pay than the value of what they actually produced in a work period. This *surplus value,* which was retained and reinvested by the capitalist, was the basis of the entire capitalist system. The capitalist system grew by continually increasing the level of exploitation of the workers (and therefore the amount of surplus value) and investing the profits for the expansion of the system.

Marx also was affected by the political economists’ depiction of the horrors of the capitalist system and the exploitation of the workers. However, whereas they depicted the evils of capitalism, Marx criticized the political economists for seeing these evils as inevitable components of capitalism. Marx deplored their general acceptance of capitalism and the way they urged people to work for economic success within it. He also was critical of the political economists for failing to see the inherent conflict between capitalists and laborers and for denying the need for a radical change in the economic order. Such conservative economics was hard for Marx to accept, given his commitment to a radical change from capitalism to socialism.

**Marx and Sociology**
Marx was not a sociologist and did not consider himself one. Although his work is too broad to be encompassed by the term sociology, there is a sociological theory to be found in Marx's work. From the beginning, there were those who were heavily influenced by Marx, and there has been a continuous strand of Marxian sociology, primarily in Europe. But for the majority of early sociologists, his work was a negative force, something against which to shape their sociology. Until very recently, sociological theory, especially in America, has been characterized by either hostility to or ignorance of Marxian theory. This has, as we will see in Chapter 2, changed dramatically, but the negative reaction to Marx's work was a major force in the shaping of much of sociological theory (Gurney, 1981).

The basic reason for this rejection of Marx was ideological. Many of the early sociological theorists were inheritors of the conservative reaction to the disruptions of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Marx's radical ideas and the radical social changes he foretold and sought to bring to life were clearly feared and hated by such thinkers. Marx was dismissed as an ideologist. It was argued that he was not a serious sociological theorist. However, ideology per se could not have been the real reason for the rejection of Marx, because the work of Comte, Durkheim, and other conservative thinkers also was heavily ideological. It was the nature of the ideology, not the existence of ideology as such, that put off many sociological theorists. They were ready and eager to buy conservative ideology wrapped in a cloak of sociological theory, but not the radical ideology offered by Marx and his followers.

There were, of course, other reasons why Marx was not accepted by many early theorists. He seemed to be more an economist than a sociologist. Although the early sociologists would certainly admit the importance of the economy, they would also argue that it was only one of a number of components of social life.

Another reason for the early rejection of Marx was the nature of his interests. Whereas the early sociologists were reacting to the disorder created by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and later the Industrial Revolution, Marx was not upset by these disorders—not by disorder in general. Rather, what interested and concerned Marx most was the oppressiveness of the capitalist system that was emerging out of the Industrial Revolution. Marx wanted to develop a theory that explained this oppressiveness and that would help overthrow that system. Marx's interest was in revolution, which stood in contrast to the conservative concern for reform and orderly change.

Another difference worth noting is the difference in philosophical roots between Marxian and conservative sociological theory. Most of the conservative theorists were heavily influenced by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Among other things, this led them to think in linear, cause-and-effect terms. In contrast, Marx was most heavily influenced, as we have seen, by Hegel, who thought in dialectical rather than cause-and-effect terms. Among other things, the dialectic attunes us to the ongoing reciprocal effects of social forces.

**Marx's Theory**

To oversimplify enormously (see Chapter 6 for a much more detailed discussion), Marx offered a theory of capitalist society based on his image of the basic nature of human beings. Marx believed that people are basically productive; that is, in order to survive, people need to work in, and with, nature. In so doing, they
produce the food, clothing, tools, shelter, and other necessities that permit them to live. Their productivity is a perfectly natural way by which they express basic creative impulses. Furthermore, these impulses are expressed in concert with other people; in other words, people are inherently social. They need to work together to produce what they need to survive.

Throughout history, this natural process has been subverted, at first by the mean conditions of primitive society and later by a variety of structural arrangements erected by societies in the course of history. In various ways, these structures interfered with the natural productive process. However, it is in capitalist society that this breakdown is most acute; the breakdown in the natural productive process reaches its culmination in capitalism.

Basically, capitalism is a structure (or, more accurately, a series of structures) that erects barriers between an individual and the production process, the products of that process, and other people; ultimately, it even divides the individual himself or herself. This is the basic meaning of the concept of alienation: it is the breakdown of the natural interconnection among people and between people and what they produce. Alienation occurs because capitalism has evolved into a two-class system in which a few capitalists own the production process, the products, and the labor time of those who work for them. Instead of naturally producing for themselves, people produce unnaturally in capitalist society for a small group of capitalists. Intellectually, Marx was very concerned with the structures of capitalism and their oppressive impact on actors. Politically, he was led to an interest in emancipating people from the oppressive structures of capitalism.

Marx actually spent very little time dreaming about what a utopian socialist state would look like (Lovell, 1992). He was more concerned with helping to bring about the demise of capitalism. He believed that the contradictions and conflicts within capitalism would lead dialectically to its ultimate collapse, but he did not think that the process was inevitable. People had to act at the appropriate times and in the appropriate ways for socialism to come into being. The capitalists had great resources at their disposal to forestall the coming of socialism, but they could be overcome by the concerted action of a class-conscious proletariat. What would the proletariat create in the process? What is socialism? Most basically, it is a society in which, for the first time, people could interact harmoniously with nature and with other people to create what they needed to survive. To put it another way, in socialist society, people would no longer be alienated.

The Roots and Nature of the Theories of Max Weber (1864–1920) and Georg Simmel (1858–1918)

Although Marx and his followers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remained outside mainstream German sociology, to a considerable extent early German sociology can be seen as developing in opposition to Marxian theory.

Weber and Marx

Albert Salomon, for example, claimed that a large part of the theory of the early giant of German sociology,
Max Weber, developed “in a long and intense debate with the ghost of Marx” (1945:596). This is probably an exaggeration, but in many ways Marxian theory did play a negative role in Weberian theory. In other ways, however, Weber was working within the Marxian tradition, trying to “round out” Marx's theory. Also, there were many inputs into Weberian theory other than Marxian theory (Burger, 1976). We can clarify a good deal about the sources of German sociology by outlining each of these views of the relationship between Marx and Weber (Antonio and Glassman, 1985; Schroeter, 1985). Bear in mind that Weber was not intimately familiar with Marx's work (much of it was not published until after Weber's death) and that Weber was reacting more to the work of the Marxists than to Marx's work itself (Antonio, 1985:29; B. Turner, 1981:19–20).

Weber did tend to view Marx and the Marxists of his day as economic determinists who offered single-cause theories of social life. That is, Marxian theory was seen as tracing all historical developments to economic bases and viewing all contemporaneous structures as erected on an economic base. Although this is not true of Marx's own theory (as we will see in Chapter 6), it was the position of many later Marxists.

One of the examples of economic determinism that seemed to rankle Weber most was the view that ideas are simply the reflections of material (especially economic) interests, that material interests determine ideology. From this point of view, Weber was supposed to have “turned Marx on his head” (much as Marx had inverted Hegel). Instead of focusing on economic factors and their effect on ideas, Weber devoted much of his attention to ideas and their effect on the economy. Rather than seeing ideas as simple reflections of economic factors, Weber saw them as fairly autonomous forces capable of profoundly affecting the economic world.

Weber certainly devoted a lot of attention to ideas, particularly systems of religious ideas, and he was especially concerned with the impact of religious ideas on the economy. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-1905/1958), he was concerned with Protestantism, mainly as a system of ideas, and its impact on the rise of another system of ideas, the “spirit of capitalism,” and ultimately on a capitalist economic system. Weber had a similar interest in other world religions, looking at how their nature might have obstructed the development of capitalism in their respective societies. A second view of Weber's relationship to Marx, as mentioned earlier, is that he did not so much oppose Marx as try to round out Marx's theoretical perspective. Here Weber is seen as working more within the Marxian tradition than in opposition to it. His work on religion, interpreted from this point of view, was simply an effort to show that not only do material factors affect ideas, but ideas themselves affect material structures.

A good example of the view that Weber was engaged in a process of rounding out Marxian theory is in the area of stratification theory. In this work on stratification, Marx focused on social class, the economic dimension of stratification. Although Weber accepted the importance of this factor, he argued that other dimensions of stratification were also important. He argued that the notion of social stratification should be extended to include stratification on the basis of prestige (status) and power. The inclusion of these other dimensions does not constitute a refutation of Marx but is simply an extension of his ideas.

Both of the preceding views accept the importance of Marxian theory for Weber. There are elements of truth in both positions; at some points Weber was working in opposition to Marx, whereas at other points he was extending Marx's ideas. However, a third view of this issue may best characterize the relationship between
Marx and Weber. In this view, Marx is seen simply as only one of many influences on Weber’s thought.

Other Influences on Weber

We can identify a number of sources of Weberian theory, including German historians, philosophers, economists, and political theorists. Among those who influenced Weber, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) stands out above all the others. But we must not overlook the impact of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) (Antonio, 2001)—especially his emphasis on the hero—on Weber’s work on the need for individuals to stand up to the impact of bureaucracies and other structures of modern society.

The influence of Immanuel Kant on Weber, and on German sociology in general, shows that German sociology and Marxism grew from different philosophical roots. As we have seen, it was Hegel, not Kant, who was the important philosophical influence on Marxian theory. Whereas Hegel's philosophy led Marx and the Marxists to look for relations, conflicts, and contradictions, Kantian philosophy led at least some German sociologists to take a more static perspective. To Kant the world was a buzzing confusion of events that could never be known directly. The world could be known only through thought processes that filter, select, and categorize these events. The content of the real world was differentiated by Kant from the forms through which that content can be comprehended. The emphasis on these forms gave the work of those sociologists within the Kantian tradition a more static quality than that of the Marxists within the Hegelian tradition.

Weber’s Theory

Whereas Karl Marx offered basically a theory of capitalism, Weber's work was fundamentally a theory of the process of rationalization (Brubaker, 1984; Kalberg, 1980, 1990, 1994). Weber was interested in the general issue of why institutions in the Western world had grown progressively more rational while powerful barriers seemed to prevent a similar development in the rest of the world.

Although rationality is used in many ways in Weber’s work, what interests us here is a process involving one of four types identified by Stephen Kalberg (1980, 1990, 1994; see also Brubaker, 1984; D. Levine, 1981a), formal rationality. Formal rationality involves, as was usually the case with Weber, a concern for the actor making choices of means and ends. However, in this case, that choice is made in reference to universally applied rules, regulations, and laws. These, in turn, are derived from various large-scale structures, especially bureaucracies and the economy. Weber developed his theories in the context of a large number of comparative historical studies of the West, China, India, and many other regions of the world. In those studies, he sought to delineate the factors that helped bring about or impede the development of rationalization.

Weber saw the bureaucracy (and the historical process of bureaucratization) as the classic example of rationalization, but rationalization is perhaps best illustrated today by the fast-food restaurant (Ritzer, 2015). The fast-food restaurant is a formally rational system in which people (both workers and customers) are led to seek the most rational means to ends. The drive-through window, for example, is a rational means by which workers can dispense and customers can obtain food quickly and efficiently. Speed and efficiency are dictated by the fast-food restaurants and the rules and regulations by which they operate.
Weber embedded his discussion of the process of bureaucratization in a broader discussion of the political institution. He differentiated among three types of authority systems—traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. Only in the modern Western world can a rational-legal authority system develop, and only within that system does one find the full-scale development of the modern bureaucracy. The rest of the world remains dominated by traditional or charismatic authority systems, which generally impede the development of a rational-legal authority system and modern bureaucracies. Briefly, traditional authority stems from a long-lasting system of beliefs. An example would be a leader who comes to power because his or her family or clan has always provided the group's leadership. A charismatic leader derives his or her authority from extraordinary abilities or characteristics or, more likely, simply from the belief on the part of followers that the leader has such traits. Although these two types of authority are of historical importance, Weber believed that the trend in the West, and ultimately in the rest of the world, is toward systems of rational-legal authority (Bunzel, 2007). In such systems, authority is derived from rules legally and rationally enacted. Thus, the president of the United States derives his authority ultimately from the laws of society. The evolution of rational-legal authority, with its accompanying bureaucracies, is only one part of Weber's general argument on the rationalization of the Western world.

Weber also did detailed and sophisticated analyses of the rationalization of such phenomena as religion, law, the city, and even music. But we can illustrate Weber's mode of thinking with one other example—the rationalization of the economic institution. This discussion is couched in Weber's broader analysis of the relationship between religion and capitalism. In a wide-ranging historical study, Weber sought to understand why a rational economic system (capitalism) had developed in the West and why it had failed to develop in the rest of the world. Weber accorded a central role to religion in this process. At one level, he was engaged in a dialogue with the Marxists in an effort to show that, contrary to what many Marxists of the day believed, religion was not merely an epiphenomenon. Instead, it had played a key role in the rise of capitalism in the West and in its failure to develop elsewhere in the world. Weber argued that it was a distinctively rational religious system (Calvinism) that played the central role in the rise of capitalism in the West. In contrast, in the other parts of the world that he studied, Weber found more irrational religious systems (e.g., Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism), which helped inhibit the development of a rational economic system. However, in the end, one gets the feeling that these religions provided only temporary barriers, for the economic systems—indeed, the entire social structure—of these societies ultimately would become rationalized.

Although rationalization lies at the heart of Weberian theory, it is far from all there is to the theory. But this is not the place to go into that rich body of material. Instead, let us return to the development of sociological theory. A key issue in that development is: Why did Weber's theory prove more attractive to later sociological theorists than Marxian theory?

The Acceptance of Weber's Theory

One reason is that Weber proved to be more acceptable politically. Instead of espousing Marxian radicalism, Weber was more of a liberal on some issues and a conservative on others (e.g., the role of the state). Although
he was a severe critic of many aspects of modern capitalist society and came to many of the same critical conclusions as did Marx, he was not one to propose radical solutions to problems (Heins, 1993). In fact, he felt that the radical reforms offered by many Marxists and other socialists would do more harm than good.

Later sociological theorists, especially Americans, saw their society under attack by Marxian theory. Largely conservative in orientation, they cast about for theoretical alternatives to Marxism. One of those who proved attractive was Max Weber. (Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto were others.) After all, rationalization affected not only capitalist but also socialist societies. Indeed, from Weber's point of view, rationalization constituted an even greater problem in socialist than in capitalist societies.

Also in Weber's favor was the form in which he presented his judgments. He spent most of his life doing detailed historical studies, and his political conclusions were often made within the context of his research. Thus, they usually sounded very scientific and academic. Marx, although he did much serious research, also wrote a good deal of explicitly polemical material. Even his more academic work is laced with acid political judgments. For example, in *Capital* (1867/1967), he described capitalists as “vampires” and “werewolves.” Weber's more academic style helped make him more acceptable to later sociologists.

Another reason for the greater acceptability of Weber was that he operated in a philosophical tradition that also helped shape the work of later sociologists. That is, Weber operated in the Kantian tradition, which meant, as we have seen, that he tended to think in cause-and-effect terms. This kind of thinking was more acceptable to later sociologists, who were largely unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the dialectical logic that informed Marx's work.

Finally, Weber appeared to offer a much more rounded approach to the social world than did Marx. Whereas Marx appeared to be almost totally preoccupied with the economy, Weber was interested in a wide range of social phenomena. This diversity of focus seemed to give later sociologists more to work with than the apparently more single-minded concerns of Marx.

Weber produced most of his major works in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Early in his career Weber was identified more as a historian who was concerned with sociological issues, but in the early 1900s his focus grew more and more sociological. Indeed, he became the dominant sociologist of his time in Germany. In 1910, he founded (with, among others, Georg Simmel, whom we discuss next) the German Sociological Society (Glatzer, 1998). His home in Heidelberg was an intellectual center not only for sociologists but for scholars from many fields. Although his work was broadly influential in Germany, it was to become even more influential in the United States, especially after Talcott Parsons introduced Weber's ideas (and those of other European theorists, especially Durkheim) to a large American audience. Although Marx's ideas did not have a significant positive effect on American sociological theorists until the 1960s, Weber was already highly influential by the late 1930s.

**Simmel's Theory**

Georg Simmel was Weber's contemporary and a cofounder of the German Sociological Society. Simmel was a somewhat atypical sociological theorist (Frisby, 1981; D. Levine, Carter, and Gorman, 1976a, 1976b). For
one thing, he had an immediate and profound effect on the development of American sociological theory, whereas Marx and Weber were largely ignored for a number of years. Simmel's work helped shape the development of one of the early centers of American sociology—the University of Chicago—and its major theory, symbolic interactionism (Jaworski, 1995, 1997). The Chicago school and symbolic interactionism, as we will see, came to dominate American sociology in the 1920s and early 1930s (Bulmer, 1984). Simmel's ideas were influential at Chicago mainly because the dominant figures in the early years of Chicago, Albion Small and Robert Park, had been exposed to Simmel's theories in Berlin in the late 1800s. Park attended Simmel's lectures in 1899 and 1900, and Small carried on an extensive correspondence with Simmel during the 1890s. They were instrumental in bringing Simmel's ideas to students and faculty at Chicago, in translating some of his work, and in bringing it to the attention of a large-scale American audience (Frisby, 1984:29).

Another atypical aspect of Simmel's work is his “level” of analysis, or at least that level for which he became best known in America. Whereas Weber and Marx were preoccupied with large-scale issues such as the rationalization of society and a capitalist economy, Simmel was best known for his work on smaller-scale issues, especially individual action and interaction. He became famous early for his thinking, derived from Kantian philosophy, on forms of interaction (e.g., conflict) and types of interactants (e.g., the stranger). Basically, Simmel saw that understanding interaction among people was one of the major tasks of sociology. However, it was impossible to study the massive number of interactions in social life without some conceptual tools. This is where forms of interaction and types of interactants came in. Simmel felt that he could isolate a limited number of forms of interaction that could be found in a large number of social settings. Thus equipped, one could analyze and understand these different interaction settings. The development of a limited number of types of interactants could be similarly useful in explaining interaction settings. This work had a profound effect on symbolic interactionism, which, as the name suggests, was focally concerned with interaction. One of the ironies, however, is that Simmel also was concerned with large-scale issues similar to those that obsessed Marx and Weber. However, this work was much less influential than his work on interaction, although there are contemporary signs of a growing interest in the large-scale aspects of Simmel's sociology.

It was partly Simmel's style in his work on interaction that made him accessible to early American sociological theorists. Although he wrote heavy tomes like those of Weber and Marx, he also wrote a set of deceptively simple essays on such interesting topics as poverty, the prostitute, the miser and the spendthrift, and the stranger. The brevity of such essays and the high interest level of the material made the dissemination of Simmel's ideas much easier.

This early American focus on Simmel's microsociology had the negative effect of obscuring two further aspects of Simmel's work. First, Simmel was an influential figure in the Lebensphilosophie (life philosophy) movement. The concept of “life” was foundational for all of Simmel's work (Pyhhtinen, 2010). Basically, he held that view that human action is an expression of ever-changing, dynamic life forces. Human society exists as a tension between the movement of life and humans’ efforts to stabilize life in social and cultural forms. Recent English translations of Simmel’s View of Life (1918/2011) and Rembrandt (1916/2005) have
stimulated scholarship on this aspect of his work.

Second, the focus on Simmel’s smaller essays had the negative effect of obscuring Simmel’s more massive, and macrosociological, works. For example, the English translation of Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* (1907/1978; see Poggi, 1993) has made it attractive to a whole set of theorists interested in culture and society. Although a macro orientation is clearer in *Philosophy of Money*, it always existed in Simmel’s work. For example, it is clear in his famous work on the dyad and the triad. Simmel thought that some crucial sociological developments take place when a two-person group (or dyad) is transformed into a triad by the addition of a third party. Social possibilities emerge that simply could not exist in a dyad. For example, in a triad, one of the members can become an arbitrator or mediator of the differences between the other two. More important, two of the members can band together and dominate the other member. This represents on a small scale what can happen with the emergence of large-scale structures that become separate from individuals and begin to dominate them.

This theme lies at the base of *Philosophy of Money*. Simmel was concerned primarily with the emergence in the modern world of a money economy that becomes separate from the individual and predominant. This theme, in turn, is part of an even broader and more pervasive one in Simmel’s work: the domination of the culture as a whole over the individual. As Simmel saw it, in the modern world, the larger culture and all its various components (including the money economy) expand, and as they expand, the importance of the individual decreases. Thus, for example, as the industrial technology associated with a modern economy expands and grows more sophisticated, the skills and abilities of the individual worker grow progressively less important. In the end, the worker is confronted with an industrial machine over which he or she can exert little, if any, control. More generally, Simmel thought that in the modern world, the expansion of the larger culture leads to the growing insignificance of the individual.

Although sociologists have become increasingly attuned to the broader implications of Simmel’s work, his early influence was primarily through his studies of small-scale social phenomena, such as the forms of interaction and types of interactants.
Another leading figure in German social science in the late 1800s and early 1900s was Sigmund Freud. Although he was not a sociologist, Freud influenced the work of many sociologists (e.g., Talcott Parsons and Norbert Elias) and continues to be of relevance to social theorists (Chodorow, 1999; Elliott, 1992; Kaye, 1991, 2003; Kurzweil, 1995; Movahedi, 2007).

Sigmund Freud was born in the Austro-Hungarian city of Freiberg on May 6, 1856. In 1859, his family moved to Vienna, and in 1873, Freud entered the medical school at the University of Vienna. Freud was more interested in science than in medicine and took a position in a physiology laboratory. He completed his degree in medicine, and after leaving the laboratory in 1882, he worked in a hospital and then set up a private medical practice with a specialty in nervous diseases.

Freud at first used hypnosis in an effort to deal with a type of neurosis known as hysteria. He had learned the technique in Paris from Jean-Martin Charcot in 1885. Later he adopted a technique, pioneered by a fellow Viennese physician, Joseph Breuer, in which hysterical symptoms disappeared when the patient talked through the circumstances in which the symptoms first arose. By 1895, Freud had published a book with Breuer with a series of revolutionary implications: that the causes of neuroses such as hysteria were psychological (not, as had been believed, physiological) and that the therapy involved talking through the original causes. Thus was born the practical and theoretical field of psychoanalysis. Freud began to part company with Breuer as he came to see sexual factors, or more generally the libido, at the root of neuroses. Over the next several years, Freud refined his therapeutic techniques and wrote...
a great deal about his new ideas.

By 1902, Freud began to gather a number of disciples around him, and they met weekly at his house. By 1903 or 1904, others (e.g., Carl Jung) began to use Freud's ideas in their psychiatric practices. In 1908, the first Psychoanalytic Congress was held, and the next year a periodical for disseminating psychoanalytic knowledge was formed. As quickly as it had formed, the new field of psychoanalysis became splintered as Freud broke with people such as Jung and they went off to develop their own ideas and found their own groups. World War I slowed the development of psychoanalysis, but it expanded and developed greatly in the 1920s. With the rise of Nazism, the center of psychoanalysis shifted to the United States. But Freud remained in Vienna until the Nazis took over in 1938, despite the fact that he was Jewish and the Nazis had burned his books as early as 1933. On June 4, 1938, only after a ransom had been paid and President Roosevelt had interceded, Sigmund Freud left Vienna. Freud had suffered from cancer of the jaw since 1923, and he died in London on September 23, 1939.
The Origins of British Sociology

We have been examining the development of sociology in France (Comte, Durkheim) and Germany (Marx, Weber, and Simmel). We turn now to the parallel development of sociology in England. As we will see, Continental ideas had their impact on early British sociology, but more important were native influences.

Political Economy, Ameliorism, and Social Evolution

Philip Abrams (1968) contended that British sociology was shaped in the nineteenth century by three often conflicting sources—political economy, ameliorism, and social evolution. Thus, when the Sociological Society of London was founded in 1903, there were strong differences over the definition of sociology. However, few doubted the view that sociology could be a science. It was the differences that gave British sociology its distinctive character, and we will look at each of them briefly.

Political Economy

We have already touched on political economy, which was a theory of industrial and capitalist society traceable in part to the work of Adam Smith (1723–1790). As we saw, political economy had a profound effect on Karl Marx. Marx studied political economy closely, and he was critical of it. But that was not the direction taken by British economists and sociologists. They tended to accept Smith's idea that there was an “invisible hand” that shaped the market for labor and goods. The market was seen as an independent reality that stood above individuals and controlled their behavior. The British sociologists, like the political economists and unlike Marx, saw the market as a positive force, as a source of order, harmony, and integration in society. Because they saw the market, and more generally society, in a positive light, the task of the sociologist was not to criticize society but simply to gather data on the laws by which it operated. The goal was to provide the government with the facts it needed to understand the way the system worked and to direct its workings wisely.

The emphasis was on facts, but which facts? Whereas Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Comte looked to the structures of society for their basic facts, the British thinkers tended to focus on the individuals who made up those structures. In dealing with large-scale structures, they tended to collect individual-level data and then combine them to form a collective portrait. In the mid-1800s it was the statisticians who dominated British social science, and this kind of data collection was deemed to be the major task of sociology. Instead of general theorizing, the “emphasis settled on the business of producing more exact indicators, better methods of classification and data collection, improved life tables, higher levels of comparability between discrete bodies of data, and the like” (Abrams, 1968:18).

It was almost in spite of themselves that these statistically oriented sociologists came to see some limitations in their approach. A few began to feel the need for broader theorizing. To them, a problem such as poverty pointed to failings in the market system as well as in the society as a whole. But most, focused as they were on individuals, did not question the larger system; they turned instead to more detailed field studies and to the development of more complicated and more exact statistical techniques. To them, the source of the problem
had to lie in inadequate research methods, not in the system as a whole. As Philip Abrams noted, “Focusing persistently on the distribution of individual circumstances, the statisticians found it hard to break through to a perception of poverty as a product of social structure…. They did not and probably could not achieve the concept of structural victimization” (1968:27). In addition to their theoretical and methodological commitments to the study of individuals, the statisticians worked too closely with government policy makers to arrive at the conclusion that the larger political and economic system was the problem.

Ameliorism

Related to, but separable from, political economy was the second defining characteristic of British sociology—ameliorism, or a desire to solve social problems by reforming individuals. Although British scholars began to recognize that there were problems in society (e.g., poverty), they still believed in that society and wanted to preserve it. They desired to forestall violence and revolution and to reform the system so that it could continue essentially as it was. Above all, they wanted to prevent the coming of a socialist society. Thus, like French sociology and some branches of German sociology, British sociology was conservatively oriented.

Because the British sociologists could not or would not trace the source of problems such as poverty to the society as a whole, the source had to lie within the individuals themselves. This was an early form of what William Ryan (1971) later called “blaming the victim.” Much attention was devoted to a long series of individual problems—“ignorance, spiritual destitution, impurity, bad sanitation, pauperism, crime, and intemperance—above all intemperance” (Abrams, 1968:39). Clearly, there was a tendency to look for a simple cause for all social ills, and the one that suggested itself before all others was alcoholism. What made this perfect to the ameliorist was that this was an individual pathology, not a social pathology. The ameliorists lacked a theory of social structure, a theory of the social causes of such individual problems.

Social Evolution

But a stronger sense of social structure was lurking below the surface of British sociology, and it burst through in the latter part of the nineteenth century with the growth of interest in social evolution (Maryanski, 2005; Sanderson, 2001). One important influence was the work of Auguste Comte, part of which had been translated into English in the 1850s by Harriet Martineau (Hoecker-Drysdale, 2011). Although Comte’s work did not inspire immediate interest, by the last quarter of the century, a number of thinkers had been attracted to it and to its concern for the larger structures of society, its scientific (positivistic) orientation, its comparative orientation, and its evolutionary theory. However, a number of British thinkers sharpened their own conception of the world in opposition to some of the excesses of Comtian theory (e.g., the tendency to elevate sociology to the status of a religion).

In Abrams’s view, the real importance of Comte lay in his providing one of the bases on which opposition could be mounted against the “oppressive genius of Herbert Spencer” (Abrams, 1968:58). In both a positive and a negative sense, Spencer was a dominant figure in British sociological theory, especially evolutionary theory (J. Turner, 2000, 2007).
Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

In attempting to understand Spencer's ideas (Haines, 2005; J. Turner, 2007; see Chapter 5), it is useful to compare and contrast them with Comtian theory.

Spencer and Comte

Spencer is often categorized with Comte in terms of their influence on the development of sociological theory (J. Turner, 2001a), but there are some important differences between them. For example, it is less easy to categorize Spencer as a conservative. In fact, in his early years, Spencer is better seen as a political liberal, and he retained elements of liberalism throughout his life (Francis, 2011). However, it is also true that Spencer grew more conservative during the course of his life and that his basic influence, as was true of Comte, was conservative.

One of his liberal views, which coexisted rather uncomfortably with his conservatism, was his acceptance of a laissez-faire doctrine: he felt that the state should not intervene in individual affairs except in the rather passive function of protecting people. This meant that Spencer, unlike Comte, was not interested in social reforms; he wanted social life to evolve free of external control.

This difference points to Spencer as a Social Darwinist (G. Jones, 1980; Weiler, 2007a). As such, he held the evolutionary view that the world was growing progressively better. Therefore, it should be left alone; outside interference could only worsen the situation. He adopted the view that social institutions, like plants and animals, adapted progressively and positively to their social environment. He also accepted the Darwinian view that a process of natural selection, “survival of the fittest,” occurred in the social world. (Interestingly, it was Spencer who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” several years before Charles Darwin's work on natural selection.) That is, if unimpeded by external intervention, people who were “fit” would survive and proliferate whereas the “unfit” eventually would die out. Another difference was that Spencer emphasized the individual, whereas Comte focused on larger units such as the family.

Comte and Spencer shared with Durkheim and others a commitment to a science of sociology (Haines, 1992), which was a very attractive perspective to early theorists. Another influence of Spencer's work, shared with both Comte and Durkheim, was his tendency to see society as an organism. In this, Spencer borrowed his perspective and concepts from biology. He was concerned with the overall structure of society, the interrelationship of the parts of society, and the functions of the parts for each other as well as for the system as a whole.

Most important, Spencer, like Comte, had an evolutionary conception of historical development. However, Spencer was critical of Comte's evolutionary theory on several grounds. Specifically, he rejected Comte's law of the three stages. He argued that Comte was content to deal with evolution in the realm of ideas, in terms of intellectual development. Spencer, however, sought to develop an evolutionary theory in the real, material world.

Evolutionary Theory
It is possible to identify at least two major evolutionary perspectives in Spencer’s work (Haines, 1988; Perrin, 1976).

The first of these theories relates primarily to the increasing size of society. Society grows through both the multiplication of individuals and the union of groups (compounding). The increasing size of society brings with it larger and more differentiated social structures, as well as the increasing differentiation of the functions they perform. In addition to their growth in terms of size, societies evolve through compounding, that is, by unifying more and more adjoining groups. Thus, Spencer talked of the evolutionary movement from simple to compound, doubly compound, and trebly compound societies.

Spencer also offered a theory of evolution from militant to industrial societies. Earlier, militant societies are defined by being structured for offensive and defensive warfare. Although Spencer was critical of warfare, he felt that in an earlier stage it was functional in bringing societies together (e.g., through military conquest) and in creating the larger aggregates of people necessary for the development of industrial society. However, with the emergence of industrial society, warfare ceases to be functional and serves to impede further evolution. Industrial society is based on friendship, altruism, elaborate specialization, recognition for achievements rather than the characteristics one is born with, and voluntary cooperation among highly disciplined individuals. Such a society is held together by voluntary contractual relations and, more important, by a strong common morality. The government’s role is restricted and focuses only on what people ought not to do. Obviously, modern industrial societies are less warlike than their militant predecessors. Although Spencer saw a general evolution in the direction of industrial societies, he also recognized that it was possible that there would be periodic regressions to warfare and more militant societies.

In his ethical and political writings, Spencer offered other ideas on the evolution of society. For one thing, he saw society as progressing toward an ideal, or perfect, moral state. For another, he argued that the fittest societies survive, and unfit societies should be permitted to die off. The result of this process is adaptive upgrading for the world as a whole.

Spencer offered a rich and complicated set of ideas on social evolution. As we will see, his ideas first enjoyed great success, then were rejected for many years, and more recently have been revived with the rise of neoevolutionary sociological theories (Buttel, 1990, Sanderson, 2007).

The Reaction against Spencer in Britain

Despite his emphasis on the individual, Spencer was best known for his large-scale theory of social evolution. In this, he stood in stark contrast to the sociology that preceded him in Britain. However, the reaction against Spencer was based more on the threat that his idea of survival of the fittest posed to the ameliorism so dear to most early British sociologists. Although Spencer later repudiated some of his more outrageous ideas, he did argue for a survival-of-the-fittest philosophy and against government intervention and social reform:

Fostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good, is an extreme cruelty. It is a deliberate stirring-up of miseries for future generations. There is no greater curse to posterity than that of
bequeathing to them an increasing population of imbeciles and idlers and criminals.... The whole effort of nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better.... If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die.

(Spencer, cited in Abrams, 1968:74)

Such sentiments were clearly at odds with the ameliorative orientation of the British reformer-sociologists.
The Key Figure in Early Italian Sociology

We close this sketch of early, primarily conservative, European sociological theory with a brief mention of one Italian sociologist, Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923). Pareto was influential in his time, but his contemporary relevance is minimal (for one exception, see Powers, 1986). There was a brief outburst of interest in Pareto’s (1935) work in the 1930s, when the major American theorist, Talcott Parsons, devoted as much attention to him as he gave to Weber and Durkheim. However, in recent years, except for a few of his major concepts, Pareto has receded in importance and contemporary relevance (Femia, 1995).

Zeitlin argued that Pareto developed his “major ideas as a refutation of Marx” (1996:171). In fact, Pareto was rejecting not only Marx but also a good portion of Enlightenment philosophy. For example, whereas the Enlightenment philosophers emphasized rationality, Pareto emphasized the role of nonrational factors such as human instincts (Mozetic and Weiler, 2007). This emphasis also was tied to his rejection of Marxian theory. That is, because nonrational, instinctual factors were so important and so unchanging, it was unrealistic to hope to achieve dramatic social changes with an economic revolution.

Pareto also developed a theory of social change that stood in stark contrast to Marxian theory. Whereas Marx’s theory focused on the role of the masses, Pareto offered an elite theory of social change, which held that society inevitably is dominated by a small elite that operates on the basis of enlightened self-interest (Adams, 2005). It rules over the masses of people, who are dominated by nonrational forces. Because they lack rational capacities, the masses, in Pareto’s system, are unlikely to be a revolutionary force. Social change occurs when the elite begins to degenerate and is replaced by a new elite derived from the nongoverning elite or higher elements of the masses. After the new elite is in power, the process begins anew. Thus, Pareto conceived a cyclical theory of social change instead of the directional theories offered by Marx, Comte, Spencer, and others. In addition, Pareto’s theory of change largely ignores the plight of the masses. Elites come and go, but the lot of the masses remains the same.

This theory, however, was not Pareto’s lasting contribution to sociology. That lay in his scientific conception of sociology and the social world: “My wish is to construct a system of sociology on the model of celestial mechanics [astronomy], physics, chemistry” (cited in Hook, 1965:57). Briefly, Pareto conceived of society as a system in equilibrium, a whole consisting of interdependent parts. A change in one part was seen as leading to changes in other parts of the system. Pareto’s systemic conception of society was the most important reason Parsons devoted so much attention to Pareto’s work in his 1937 book, *The Structure of Social Action*, and it was Pareto’s most important influence on Parsons’s thinking. Fused with similar views held by those who had an organic image of society (e.g., Comte, Durkheim, and Spencer), Pareto’s theory played a central role in the development of Parsons’s theory and, more generally, in structural functionalism.

Although few modern sociologists now read Pareto’s work, it can be seen as a rejection of the Enlightenment and of Marxism and as offering an elite theory of social change that stands in opposition to the Marxian perspective.
Turn-of-the-Century Developments in European Marxism

While many nineteenth-century sociologists were developing their theories in opposition to Marx, there was a simultaneous effort by a number of Marxists to clarify and extend Marxian theory. Between roughly 1875 and 1925, there was little overlap between Marxism (Beilharz, 2005c; Steinmetz, 2007) and sociology. (Weber is an exception to this.) The two schools of thought were developing in parallel fashion with little or no interchange between them.

After the death of Marx, Marxian theory was first dominated by those who saw in his theory scientific and economic determinism (Bakker, 2007). Immanuel Wallerstein called this the era of “orthodox Marxism” (1986:1301). Friedrich Engels, Marx’s benefactor and collaborator, lived on after Marx’s death and can be seen as the first exponent of such a perspective. Basically, this view was that Marx’s scientific theory had uncovered the economic laws that ruled the capitalist world. Such laws pointed to the inevitable collapse of the capitalist system. Early Marxian thinkers, like Karl Kautsky, sought to gain a better understanding of the operation of these laws. There were several problems with this perspective. For one thing, it seemed to rule out political action, a cornerstone of Marx’s position. That is, there seemed no need for individuals, especially workers, to do anything. In that the system was inevitably crumbling, all they had to do was sit back and wait for its demise. On a theoretical level, deterministic Marxism seemed to rule out the dialectical relationship between individuals and larger social structures.

These problems led to a reaction among Marxian theorists and to the development of “Hegelian Marxism” in the early 1900s. The Hegelian Marxists refused to reduce Marxism to a scientific theory that ignored individual thought and action. They are labeled Hegelian Marxists because they sought to combine Hegel’s interest in consciousness (which some, including the authors of this text, view Marx as sharing) with the determinists’ interest in the economic structures of society. The Hegelian theorists were significant for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, they reinstated the importance of the individual, consciousness, and the relationship between thought and action. Practically, they emphasized the importance of individual action in bringing about a social revolution.

The major exponent of this point of view was Georg Lukács (Fischer, 1984; Markus, 2005). According to Martin Jay, Lukács was “the founding father of Western Marxism” and his work Class and Class Consciousness is “generally acknowledged as the charter document of Hegelian Marxism” (1984:84). Lukács had begun in the early 1900s to integrate Marxism with sociology (in particular, Weberian and Simmelian theory). This integration was soon to accelerate with the development of critical theory in the 1920s and 1930s.
The Contemporary Relevance of Classical Sociological Theory

Classical sociological theories are important not only historically (Camic, 1997) but also because they are living documents with contemporary relevance to both modern theorists and today’s social world. Edward Tiryakian (1994) has outlined three criteria for judging a sociological work a classic. First, it is “must reading” for beginners because it demonstrates “the power and imagination of sociological analysis” (Tiryakian, 1994:4). Second, it is useful to both contemporary theorists and researchers. That is, new theories are built on the shoulders of the classical theorists and their work generates hypotheses to be tested empirically by modern researchers. Third, it is of sufficient richness and depth that it is worth rereading at a later point in a sociologist’s career.

The works of the theorists discussed at least in some depth in this chapter qualify as classics in terms of these criteria. More specifically, the work of the classical thinkers continues to inspire modern sociologists in a variety of ways. Let us look briefly at just a few examples of this kind of work.

Although Durkheim is usually seen as a political conservative, some commentators see a more radical, even revolutionary, strand in Durkheimian theory (Gane, 1992; Pearce, 1989). In fact, Frank Pearce’s major theme is “that the development of many of Durkheim’s concepts can be used to help specify a realistic set of socialist goals” (1989:10). Jeffrey Alexander (1988a) used some of Durkheim’s ideas on culture and religion to analyze the Watergate scandal, for example, its ritualistic aspects. Stjepan Meštrović´ (1992:158) addressed Durkheim’s work in light of the contemporary conflict between modern and postmodern thinkers and concluded that Durkheimian theory provides the seeds of a perspective that is preferable to either of the others: “Durkheim was seeking a new world order that would preserve … progress and capitalist efficiency [the modern viewpoint], but that would be balanced with … mystic sympathy and a sense of international social solidarity [a more postmodern viewpoint].” Jennifer Lehmann (1993a) used a key tool of the postmodernists, “deconstruction,” to analyze Durkheim’s work. (Lehmann [1993b] has also been in the forefront of studying Durkheim’s ideas in light of feminist theory.) Specific aspects of Durkheim’s work have also spawned a great deal of contemporary thought and research, but none more than his work on suicide and its various correlates (Skog, 1991).

Similarly, Deena Weinstein and Michael Weinstein (1993) presented a “postmodernized” version of Simmelian theory to complement the well-known modern side of Simmel’s perspective. George Ritzer (1995) used aspects of Simmel’s theory to highlight many of the central problems associated with the increasingly global credit card society, especially the “temptation to imprudence,” fraud, and threats to privacy.

The challenge in interpreting Marx’s theory is the failure of communist nations ostensibly built on his principles. However, many Marxists feel that those nations were highly distorted versions of Marx’s communist vision, and with those distortions out of the way it will now be possible to gain a clearer sense of Marx’s ideas. As Keith Graham wrote, “the enterprise of assessing Marx seems to me to be in its infancy” (1992:165). Thus, Graham contended, rather than being a dusty historical figure, “Marx is our contemporary” (1992:165).
On the contemporary relevance of Weber, Harvey Goldman argued that “there is continuity between many of Weber’s concerns and the concerns of contemporary sociology … Weber still has much to contribute to the development of contemporary sociology” (1993:859). Said Randall Collins, “Reading Weber, for some of us, is at least as worthwhile as reading contemporary writers on the same topics, if not more so. Weber is deeper, more analytical, more comprehensive … Weber in many respects is still the state of the art” (1993:861).

Examinations of the success of the Japanese (Ritzer and LeMoyne, 1991) and, more generally, a number of Asian (Biggart, 1991) economies have been based on Weberian theory. As mentioned earlier, Ritzer (2015) used Weber’s rationalization theory to analyze the McDonaldization of society and, more specifically, the McDonaldization of credit through the widespread dissemination of credit cards (Ritzer, 1995: chap. 8). Weber’s most famous book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, has over the years spawned an enormous body of work, and such work continues (Davies, 1992; Silber, 1993).

Of notable interest in this context is the work of the early women sociologists discussed in Chapter 10. In many cases their work has been, or is just now being, rediscovered (Rogers, 1998, 2001). Thus, we are at the very early stages of the exploration of the contemporary relevance of the ideas of the classical female sociological thinkers. We can expect the list of contemporary effects to grow exponentially in the coming years.
Summary

This chapter sketches the early history of sociological theory. The first, and much briefer, section deals with the various social forces involved in the development of sociological theory. Although there were many such influences, we focus on how political revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of capitalism, colonialism, socialism, feminism, urbanization, religious change, and the growth of science affected sociological theory. The second part of the chapter examines the influence of intellectual forces on the rise of sociological theory in various countries. We begin with France and the role played by the Enlightenment, stressing the conservative and romantic reaction to it. It is out of this interplay that French sociological theory developed. In this context, we examine the major figures in the early years of French sociology—Alexis de Tocqueville, Claude Henri Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, and Emile Durkheim.

Next, we turn to Germany and the role played by Karl Marx in the development of sociology in that country. We discuss the parallel development of Marxian theory and sociological theory and the ways in which Marxian theory influenced sociology, both positively and negatively. We begin with the roots of Marxian theory in Hegelianism, materialism, and political economy. Marx’s theory itself is touched upon briefly. The discussion then shifts to the roots of German sociology. Max Weber’s work is examined in order to show the diverse sources of German sociology. Also discussed are some of the reasons why Weber’s theory proved more acceptable to later sociologists than did Marx’s ideas. This section closes with a brief discussion of Georg Simmel’s work.

The rise of sociological theory in Britain is considered next. The major sources of British sociology were political economy, ameliorism, and social evolution. In this context, we touch on the work of Herbert Spencer as well as on some of the controversy that surrounded it.

This discussion is followed by a brief discussion of Italian sociological theory, in particular the work of Vilfredo Pareto, and the turn-of-the-century developments in European Marxian theory, primarily economic determinism and Hegelian Marxism. Finally, there is a brief discussion of the contemporary relevance of classical sociological theory.

This concludes our review of the early history of sociological theory. In this chapter, we have already discussed, in historical context, the work of seven theorists who will later receive full-chapter treatment—Tocqueville, Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. We will also touch on these theorists in the next chapter in terms of their influence on later sociological theory. Chapter 2 also includes a brief discussion, within the historical context of more recent theoretical developments, of the work of other theorists defined here as classical thinkers and treated in depth later in the book—Veblen, Schumpeter, Du Bois, Gilman, Addams, Mead, Mannheim, Schutz, and Parsons.
Notes

1. These three criteria constitute our definition of (classical) sociological theory. Such a definition stands in contrast to the formal, “scientific” definitions (Jasso, 2001) that are often used in theory texts of this type. One scientific definition of theory is a set of interrelated propositions that allows for the systematization of knowledge, explanation, and prediction of social life and the generation of new research hypotheses (Faia, 1986). Although such a definition has a number of attractions, it simply does not fit many of the idea systems to be discussed in this book. In other words, most classical (and contemporary) theories fall short on one or more of the formal components of theory, but they are nonetheless considered theories by most sociologists.

2. The word *canon* refers to a set of texts or ideas that define a discipline.

3. This section is based on the work of Irving Zeitlin (1996). Although Zeitlin’s analysis is presented here for its coherence, it has a number of limitations: there are better analyses of the Enlightenment, there are many other factors involved in shaping the development of sociology, and Zeitlin tends to overstate his case in places (for example, on the impact of Marx). But on the whole, Zeitlin provides us with a useful starting point, given our objectives in this chapter.

4. Although we have emphasized the discontinuities between the Enlightenment and the counter-Enlightenment, Seidman has made the point that there also are continuities and linkages. First, the counter-Enlightenment carried on the scientific tradition developed in the Enlightenment. Second, it picked up the Enlightenment emphasis on collectivities (as opposed to individuals) and greatly extended it. Third, both had an interest in the problems of the modern world, especially its negative effects on individuals.

5. Although he recognized that Comte created the label “sociology,” Björn Eriksson (1993) challenged the idea that Comte is the progenitor of modern, scientific sociology. Rather, Eriksson considered people such as Adam Smith and more generally the Scottish Moralists, as the true source of modern sociology. See also Lisa Hill (1996) on the importance of Adam Ferguson and Edna Ullmann-Margalit (1997) on Ferguson and Adam Smith (see also Rundell, 2001).

6. For an argument against this and the view of continuity between Marxian and mainstream sociology, see Seidman (1983).

7. First used by Joseph Dietzgen in 1857, the term *dialectical materialism* was made central by Georgi Plekhanov in 1891. Although he practiced dialectical materialism, Marx himself never used the term (Beamish, 2007).

8. For more recent developments in British sociology, see Abrams et al. (1981).

9. Smith is usually included as a leading member of the Scottish Enlightenment (Chitnis, 1976; Strydom, 2005) and as one of the Scottish Moralists (Schneider, 1967:xi), who were seeking to establish the basis for sociology.
2 A Historical Sketch of Sociological Theory: The Later Years
Chapter Outline

Early American Sociological Theory
Sociological Theory to Midcentury
Sociological Theory from Midcentury
Late Twentieth-Century Developments in Sociological Theory
Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity
Social Theory in the Twenty-First Century

It is difficult to give a precise date for the founding of sociology in the United States. A course in social problems was taught at Oberlin as early as 1858, Auguste Comte’s term sociology was used by George Fitzhugh in 1854, and William Graham Sumner taught social science courses at Yale beginning in 1873. During the 1880s, courses specifically bearing the title “Sociology” began to appear. The first department with sociology in its name was founded at the University of Kansas in 1889. In 1892, Albion Small moved to the University of Chicago and set up the new Department of Sociology. In 1897, W. E. B. Du Bois started to build the sociology department at Atlanta University. Although, historically, the Chicago department has been called the first important center of American sociology (Matthews, 1977), Earl Wright (2002) and Aldon Morris (2015) have argued that the Du Bois-Atlanta school can make equal claim to that title.
Early American Sociological Theory

Politics

Julia Schwendinger and Herman Schwendinger (1974) argued that the early American sociologists are best described as political liberals and not, as was true of most early European theorists, as conservatives. The liberalism characteristic of early American sociology had two basic elements. First, it operated with a belief in the freedom and welfare of the individual. In this belief, it was influenced far more by Herbert Spencer’s orientation than by Comte’s more collective position. Second, many sociologists associated with this orientation adopted an evolutionary view of social progress (W. Fine, 1979). However, they were split over how best to bring about this progress. Some argued that steps should be taken by the government to aid social reform, whereas others pushed a laissez-faire doctrine, arguing that the various components of society should be left to solve their own problems.

Liberalism, taken to its extreme, comes very close to conservatism. Both the belief in social progress—in reform or a laissez-faire doctrine—and the belief in the importance of the individual lead to positions supportive of the system as a whole. The overriding belief is that the social system works or can be reformed to work. There is little criticism of the system as a whole; in the American case this means, in particular, that there is little questioning of capitalism. Instead of imminent class struggle, the early sociologists saw a future of class harmony and class cooperation. Ultimately this meant that early American sociological theory helped rationalize exploitation, domestic and international imperialism, and social inequality (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1974). In the end, the political liberalism of the early sociologists had enormously conservative implications.

Figure 2.1 Sociological Theory: The Later Years

Social Change and Intellectual Currents
In their analyses of the founding of American sociological theory, Roscoe Hinkle (1980) and Ellsworth Fuhrman (1980) outlined several basic contexts from which that body of theory emerged. Of utmost importance are the social changes that occurred in American society after the Civil War (Bramson, 1961). In Chapter 1, we discussed an array of factors involved in the development of European sociological theory; several of those factors (such as industrialization and urbanization) were also intimately involved in the development of theory in America. In Fuhrman’s view, the early American sociologists saw the positive possibilities of industrialization, but they also were well aware of its dangers. Although these early sociologists were attracted to the ideas generated by the labor movement and socialist groups about dealing with the dangers of industrialization, they were not in favor of radically overhauling society.

Arthur Vidich and Stanford Lyman (1985) have made a strong case for the influence of Christianity, especially Protestantism, on the founding of American sociology. American sociologists retained the Protestant interest in saving the world and merely substituted one language (science) for another (religion). “From 1854, when the first works in sociology appeared in the United States, until the outbreak of World War I, sociology was a moral and intellectual response to the problems of American life and thought, institutions, and creeds” (Vidich and Lyman, 1985:1). Sociologists sought to define, study, and help solve these social problems. Whereas the clergyman worked within religion to help improve it and people’s lot within it, the sociologist did the same thing within society. Given their religious roots, and the religious parallels, the vast majority of sociologists did not challenge the basic legitimacy of society.

Another major factor in the founding of American sociology discussed by both Hinkle and Fuhrman is the simultaneous emergence in America, in the late 1800s, of academic professions (including sociology) and the modern university system. In Europe, in contrast, the university system was already well established before the emergence of sociology. Although sociology had a difficult time becoming established in Europe, it had easier going in the more fluid setting of the new American university system.

Another characteristic of early American sociology (as well as other social science disciplines) was its turn away from a historical perspective and in the direction of a positivistic, or “scientistic,” orientation. As Dorothy Ross put it, “The desire to achieve universalistic abstraction and quantitative methods turned American social scientists away from interpretive models available in history and cultural anthropology, and from the generalizing and interpretive model offered by Max Weber” (1991:473). Instead of interpreting long-term historical changes, sociology had turned in the direction of scientifically studying short-term processes.

Still another factor was the impact of established European theory on American sociological theory. European theorists largely created sociological theory, and the Americans were able to rely on this groundwork. The Europeans most important to the Americans were Spencer and Comte. Georg Simmel was of some importance in the early years, but the influence of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx was not to have a dramatic effect for a number of years. The history of Spencer’s ideas provides an interesting and informative illustration of the impact of early European theory on American sociology.

Herbert Spencer’s Influence on Sociology
Why were Spencer’s ideas so much more influential in the early years of American sociology than those of Comte, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber? Richard Hofstadter (1959) offered several explanations. To take the easiest first, Spencer wrote in English, whereas the others did not. In addition, Spencer wrote in nontechnical terms, making his work broadly accessible. Indeed, some have argued that the lack of technicality is traceable to Spencer’s not being a very sophisticated scholar. But there are other, more important reasons for Spencer’s broad appeal. He offered a scientific orientation that was attractive to an audience that was becoming enamored of science and its technological products. He offered a comprehensive theory that seemed to deal with the entire sweep of human history. The breadth of his ideas, as well as the voluminous work he produced, allowed his theory to be many different things to many different people. Finally, and perhaps most important, his theory was soothing and reassuring to a society undergoing the wrenching process of industrialization—society was, according to Spencer, steadily moving in the direction of greater and greater progress.

Spencer’s most famous American disciple was William Graham Sumner, who accepted and expanded upon many of Spencer’s Social Darwinist ideas. Spencer also influenced other early American sociologists, among them Lester Ward, Charles Horton Cooley, E. A. Ross, and Robert Park.

By the 1930s, however, Spencer was in eclipse in the intellectual world in general, as well as in sociology. His Social Darwinist, laissez-faire ideas seemed ridiculous in the light of massive social problems, a world war, and a major economic depression. In 1937 Talcott Parsons announced Spencer’s intellectual death for sociology when he echoed the historian Crane Brinton’s words of a few years earlier, “Who now reads Spencer?” Today Spencer is of little more than historical interest, but his ideas were important in shaping early American sociological theory. Let us look briefly at the work of two American theorists who were influenced, at least in part, by Spencer’s work.

**William Graham Sumner (1840–1910)**

William Graham Sumner taught the first course in the United States that could be called sociology (Delaney, 2005b). Sumner contended that he had begun teaching sociology “years before any such attempt was made at any other university in the world” (Curtis, 1981:63).

Sumner was the major exponent of Social Darwinism in the United States, although he appeared to change his view late in life (Delaney, 2005b; Dickens, 2005; N. Smith, 1979; Weiler, 2007a, 2007b). The following exchange between Sumner and one of his students illustrates his “liberal” views on the need for individual freedom and his position against government interference:

“Professor, don’t you believe in any government aid to industries?”

“No! It’s root, hog, or die.”

“Yes, but hasn’t the hog got a right to root?”

“There are no rights. The world owes nobody a living.”
“You believe then, Professor, in only one system, the contract-competitive system?”

“That’s the only sound economic system. All others are fallacies.”

“Well, suppose some professor of political economy came along and took your job away from you. Wouldn’t you be sore?”

“Any other professor is welcome to try. If he gets my job, it is my fault. My business is to teach the subject so well that no one can take the job away from me.”

(Phelps, cited in Hofstadter, 1959:54)

Sumner basically adopted a survival-of-the-fittest approach to the social world. Like Spencer, he saw people struggling against their environment, and the fittest were those who would be successful. Thus, Sumner was a supporter of human aggressiveness and competitiveness. Those who succeeded deserved it, and those who did not succeed deserved to fail. Again like Spencer, Sumner was opposed to efforts, especially government efforts, to aid those who had failed. In his view such intervention operated against the natural selection that, among people as among lower animals, allowed the fit to survive and the unfit to perish. As Sumner put it, “If we do not like the survival of the fittest, we have only one possible alternative, and that is survival of the unfittest” (Curtis, 1981:84). This theoretical system fit in well with the development of capitalism because it provided theoretical legitimacy for the existence of great differences in wealth and power.

Sumner is of little more than historical interest for two main reasons. First, his orientation and Social Darwinism in general have come to be regarded as little more than a crude legitimation of competitive capitalism and the status quo. Second, he failed to establish a solid enough base at Yale to build a school of sociology with many disciples. That kind of success was to occur some years later at the University of Chicago (Heyl and Heyl, 1976). In spite of success in his time, “Sumner is remembered by few today” (Curtis, 1981:146).

Lester F. Ward (1841–1913)

Lester Ward had an unusual career in that he spent most of it as a paleontologist working for the federal government. During that time, Ward read Spencer and Comte and developed a strong interest in sociology. He published a number of works in the late 1800s and early 1900s in which he expounded his sociological theory. As a result of the fame that this work achieved, in 1906 Ward was elected the first president of the American Sociological Society. It was only then that he took his first academic position, at Brown University, a position that he held until his death (M. Hill, 2007).

Ward, like Sumner, accepted the idea that people had evolved from lower forms to their present status. He believed that early society was characterized by its simplicity and its moral poverty, whereas modern society was more complex, was happier, and offered greater freedom. One task of sociology, pure sociology, was to study the basic laws of social change and social structure. But Ward was not content simply to have sociologists study social life. He believed that sociology should have a practical side; there should also be an
applied sociology. This applied sociology involved the conscious use of scientific knowledge to attain a better society. Thus, Ward was not an extreme Social Darwinist; he believed in the need for and importance of social reform.

Although of historical importance, Sumner and Ward have not been of long-term significance to sociological theory. However, now we turn, first briefly to a theorist of the time, Thorstein Veblen, who has been of long-term significance and whose influence today in sociology is increasing. Then we look at a group of theorists, especially George Herbert Mead, and a school, the Chicago school, that came to dominate sociology in America. The Chicago school was unusual in the history of sociology in that it was one of the few (the Durkheimian school in Paris was another) “collective intellectual enterprises of an integrated kind” in the history of sociology (Bulmer, 1984:1). The tradition begun at the University of Chicago is of continuing importance to sociology and its theoretical (and empirical) status.

Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929)

Veblen, who was not a sociologist but mainly held positions in economics departments (and even in economics was a marginal figure), nonetheless produced a body of social theory that is of enduring significance to those in a number of disciplines, including sociology (K. McCormick, 2011; Powers, 2005). The central problem for Veblen was the clash between “business” and “industry.” By business, Veblen meant the owners, leaders, “captains” of industry who focused on the profits of their own companies but, to keep prices and profits high, often engaged in efforts to limit production. In so doing they obstructed the operation of the industrial system and adversely affected society as a whole (e.g., through higher rates of unemployment), which is best served by the unimpeded operation of industry. Thus, business leaders were the source of many problems within society, which, Veblen felt, should be led by people (e.g., engineers) who understood the industrial system and its operation and were interested in the general welfare.

Most of Veblen’s importance today is traceable to his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1994; Varul, 2007). Veblen was critical of the leisure class (which is closely tied to business) for its role in fostering wasteful consumption. To impress the rest of society, the leisure class engages in both “conspicuous leisure” (the nonproductive use of time) and “conspicuous consumption” (spending more money on goods than they are worth). People in all other social classes are influenced by this example and seek, directly and indirectly, to emulate the leisure class. The result is a society characterized by the waste of time and money. What is of utmost importance about this work is that unlike most other sociological works of the time (as well as most of Veblen’s other works), *The Theory of the Leisure Class* focuses on consumption rather than production. Thus, it anticipated the current shift in social theory away from a focus on production and toward a focus on consumption (Ritzer, 2010; Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhoft, 2001; Slater, 1997; also a journal—*Journal of Consumer Culture*—began publication in 2001).

Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950)

Like Veblen, Joseph Schumpeter was an economist, not a sociologist, but he has come to be seen as a significant figure in sociology, especially economic sociology (Dahms, 2011; Swedberg, 1991a, 1991b). He is
best known for his work on the nature of capitalism, especially the process of “creative destruction” that, in his view, lies at the heart of the capitalist system (Schumpeter, 1976). Creation, or innovation, is central to capitalism, but it cannot occur without the destruction of older or out-of-date elements that could impede the new ones or the capitalist system more generally. This is a dynamic theory of capitalism and exists as part of Schumpeter’s highly dynamic economic theory. He contrasted his approach to the more static theories (e.g., supply and demand) that he saw as dominant in the field of economics and of which he was highly critical.

The Chicago School

The Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago was founded in 1892 by Albion Small (Williams, 2007). Small’s intellectual work is of less contemporary significance than is the key role he played in the institutionalization of sociology in the United States (Faris, 1970; Matthews, 1977). He was instrumental in creating a department at Chicago that was to become the center of the discipline in the United States for many years. Small collaborated on the first textbook in sociology in 1894. In 1895 he founded the American Journal of Sociology, a journal that to this day is a dominant force in the discipline. In 1905 Small cofounded the American Sociological Society, the major professional association of American sociologists to this day (Rhoades, 1981). (The embarrassment caused by the initials of the American Sociological Society, ASS, led to a name change in 1959 to the American Sociological Association—ASA.)

Early Chicago Sociology

The early Chicago department had several distinctive characteristics. For one thing, it had a strong connection with religion. Some members were ministers, and others were sons of ministers. Small, for example, believed that “the ultimate goal of sociology must be essentially Christian” (Matthews, 1977:95). This opinion led to a view that sociology must be interested in social reform, and this view was combined with a belief that sociology should be scientific.2 Scientific sociology with an objective of social amelioration was to be practiced in the burgeoning city of Chicago, which was beset by the positive and negative effects of urbanization and industrialization.

W. I. Thomas (1863–1947)

In 1895 W. I. Thomas became a fellow at the Chicago department, where he wrote his dissertation in 1896 (T. McCarthy, 2005). Thomas’s lasting significance was in his emphasis on the need to do scientific research on sociological issues (Lodge, 1986). Although he championed this position for many years, its major statement came in 1918 with the publication of The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, which Thomas coauthored with Florian Znaniecki (Halas, 2005; Stebbins, 2007a, 2007b; Wiley, 2007). Martin Bulmer saw it as a landmark study because it moved sociology away from “abstract theory and library research and toward the study of the empirical world utilizing a theoretical framework” (1984:45). Norbert Wiley viewed The Polish Peasant as crucial to the founding of sociology in the sense of “clarifying the unique intellectual space into which this discipline alone could see and explore” (1986:20). The book was the product of eight years of research in both Europe and the United States and was primarily a study of social disorganization among Polish migrants. The data were of little lasting importance. However, the methodology was significant. It
involved a variety of data sources, including autobiographical material, paid writings, family letters, newspaper files, public documents, and institutional letters.

Although *The Polish Peasant* was primarily a macrosociological study of social institutions, over the course of his career Thomas gravitated toward a microscopic, social-psychological orientation. He is best known for the following social-psychological statement (made in a book coauthored by Dorothy Thomas): “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (W. Thomas and Thomas, 1928:572). The emphasis was on the importance of what people think and how this affects what they do. This microscopic, social-psychological focus stood in contrast to the macroscopic, social-structural and social-cultural perspectives of such European scholars as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. It was to become one of the defining characteristics of Chicago’s theoretical product—symbolic interactionism (Rock, 1979:5).

Robert Park (1864–1944)

Another figure of significance at Chicago was Robert Park (Shils, 1996). Park had come to Chicago as a part-time instructor in 1914 and quickly worked his way into a central role in the department. Park’s importance in the development of sociology lay in several areas. First, he became the dominant figure in the Chicago department, which, in turn, dominated sociology into the 1930s. Second, Park had studied in Europe and was instrumental in bringing continental European thinkers to the attention of Chicago sociologists. Park had taken courses with Simmel, and Simmel’s ideas, particularly his focus on action and interaction, were instrumental in the development of the Chicago school’s theoretical orientation (Rock, 1979:36–48). Third, prior to becoming a sociologist, Park had been a reporter, and that experience gave him a sense of the importance of urban problems and of the need to go out into the field to collect data through personal observation (Lindner, 1996; Strauss, 1996). Out of this emerged the Chicago school’s substantive interest in urban ecology (Gaziano, 1996; Maines, Bridger, and Ulmer, 1996; Perry, Abbott, and Hutter, 1997). Fourth, Park played a key role in guiding graduate students and helping develop “a cumulative program of graduate research” (Bulmer, 1984:13). Finally, in 1921, Park and Ernest W. Burgess published the first truly important sociology textbook, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. It was to be an influential book for many years and was particularly notable for its commitments to science, research, and the study of a wide range of social phenomena.

Beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Park began to spend less time in Chicago. Finally, his lifelong interest in race relations (he had been secretary to Booker T. Washington before becoming a sociologist) led him to take a position at Fisk University (a black university) in 1934. Although the decline of the Chicago department was not caused solely or even chiefly by Park’s departure, its status began to wane in the 1930s. But before we can deal with the decline of Chicago sociology and the rise of other departments and theories, we need to return to the early days of the school and the two figures whose work was to be of the most lasting theoretical significance—Charles Horton Cooley and, most important, George Herbert Mead.3

Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929)

The association of Cooley with the Chicago school is interesting in that he spent his career at the University
of Michigan. But Cooley’s theoretical perspective was in line with the theory of symbolic interactionism that was to become Chicago’s most important product (Jacobs, 2006; Sandstrom and Kleinman, 2005; Schubert, 2005, 2007).

Cooley received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1894. He had developed a strong interest in sociology, but there was as yet no sociology department at Michigan. As a result, the questions for his Ph.D. examination came from Columbia University, where sociology had been taught since 1889 under the leadership of Franklin Giddings. Cooley began his teaching career at Michigan in 1892 before completing his doctorate.

Although Cooley theorized about large-scale phenomena such as social classes, social structures, and social institutions, he is remembered today mainly for his insights into the social-psychological aspects of social life (Schubert, 2005, 2007). His work in this area is in line with that of George Herbert Mead, although Mead was to have a deeper and more lasting effect on sociology than Cooley had. Cooley had an interest in consciousness, but he refused (as did Mead) to separate consciousness from the social context. This is best exemplified by a concept of his that survives to this day—the *looking-glass self*. By this concept, Cooley understood that people possess consciousness and that it is shaped in continuing social interaction.

A second basic concept that illustrates Cooley’s social-psychological interests, and is also of continuing interest and importance, is that of the primary group. *Primary groups* are intimate, face-to-face groups that play a key role in linking the actor to the larger society. Especially crucial are the primary groups of the young—mainly the family and the peer group. Within these groups, the individual grows into a social being. It is basically within the primary group that the looking-glass self emerges and that the ego-centered child learns to take others into account and, thereby, to become a contributing member of society.
Robert Park: A Biographical Sketch

Robert Park did not follow the typical career route of an academic sociologist—college, graduate school, professorship. Instead, he had a varied career before he became a sociologist late in life. Despite his late start, Park had a profound effect on sociology in general and on theory in particular. Park's varied experiences gave him an unusual orientation to life, and this view helped shape the Chicago school, symbolic interactionism, and, ultimately, a good portion of sociology.

Park was born in Harveyville, Pennsylvania, on February 14, 1864 (Matthews, 1977). As a student at the University of Michigan, he was exposed to a number of great thinkers, such as John Dewey. Although he was excited by ideas, Park felt a strong need to work in the real world. As Park said, “I made up my mind to go in for experience for its own sake, to gather into my soul … ‘all the joys and sorrows of the world’” (1927/1973:253). Upon graduation, he began a career as a journalist, which gave him this real-world opportunity. He particularly liked to explore (“hunting down gambling houses and opium dens” [254]). He wrote about city life in vivid detail. He would go into the field, observe and analyze, and then write up his observations. In fact, he was already doing essentially the kind of research (“scientific reporting”) that came to be one of the hallmarks of Chicago sociology—that is, urban ethnology using participant observation techniques (Lindner, 1996).

Although the accurate description of social life remained one of his passions, Park grew dissatisfied with newspaper work because it did not fulfill his familial or, more important, his intellectual needs. Furthermore, it did not seem to contribute to the improvement of the world, and Park had a deep interest in social reform. In 1898, at age thirty-four, Park left newspaper work and enrolled in the philosophy department at Harvard. He remained there for a year but then decided to move to Germany, at that time the heart of the world's intellectual life. In Berlin he encountered Georg Simmel, whose work was to have a profound influence on Park's sociology. In fact, Simmel's lectures were the only formal sociological training that Park received. As Park said, “I got most of my knowledge about society and human nature from my own observations” (1927/1973:257). In 1904, Park completed his doctoral dissertation at the University of Heidelberg. Characteristically, he was dissatisfied with his dissertation: “All I had to show was that little book and I was ashamed of it” (Matthews, 1977:57). He refused a summer teaching job at the University of Chicago and turned away from
academe as he had earlier turned away from newspaper work.

His need to contribute to social betterment led him to become secretary and chief publicity officer for the Congo Reform Association, which was set up to help alleviate the brutality and exploitation then taking place in the Belgian Congo. During this period, he met Booker T. Washington, and he was attracted to the cause of improving the lot of black Americans. He became Washington’s secretary and played a key role in the activities of the Tuskegee Institute. In 1912 he met W. I. Thomas, the Chicago sociologist, who was lecturing at Tuskegee. Thomas invited him to give a course on “the Negro in America” to a small group of graduate students at Chicago, and Park did so in 1914. The course was successful, and he gave it again the next year to an audience twice as large. At this time he joined the American Sociological Society, and only a decade later he became its president. Park gradually worked his way into a full-time appointment at Chicago, although he did not get a full professorship until 1923, when he was fifty-nine years old. Over the approximately two decades that he was affiliated with the University of Chicago, he played a key role in shaping the intellectual orientation of the sociology department.

Park remained peripatetic even after his retirement from Chicago in the early 1930s. He taught courses and oversaw research at Fisk University until he was nearly eighty years old. He traveled extensively. He died on February 7, 1944, one week before his eightieth birthday.

Both Cooley (Winterer, 1994) and Mead rejected a behavioristic view of human beings, the view that people blindly and unconsciously respond to external stimuli. They believed that people had consciousness, a self, and that it was the responsibility of the sociologist to study this aspect of social reality. Cooley urged sociologists to try to put themselves in the place of the actors they were studying, to use the method of sympathetic introspection, in order to analyze consciousness. By analyzing what they as actors might do in various circumstances, sociologists could understand the meanings and motives that are at the base of social behavior. The method of sympathetic introspection seemed, to many, to be very unscientific. In this area, among others, Mead’s work represents an advance over Cooley’s. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of similarity in the interests of the two men, not the least of which is their shared view that sociology should focus on such social-psychological phenomena as consciousness, action, and interaction.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)

The most important thinker associated with the Chicago school and symbolic interactionism was not a sociologist but a philosopher, George Herbert Mead.4 Mead started teaching philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1894, and he taught there until his death in 1931 (Chriss, 2005b; G. Cook, 1993). He is something of a paradox, given his central importance in the history of sociological theory, both because he taught philosophy, not sociology, and because he published comparatively little during his lifetime. The paradox is, in part, resolved by two facts. First, Mead taught courses in social psychology in the philosophy department, and they were taken by many graduate students in sociology. His ideas had a profound effect on a number of them. These students combined Mead’s ideas with those they were getting in the sociology department from people such as Park and Thomas. Although at the time there was no theory known as symbolic interactionism, it was created by students out of these various inputs. Thus Mead had a deep, personal impact on the people who were later to develop symbolic interactionism. Second, these students put together their notes on Mead’s courses and published a posthumous volume under his name. The work, *Mind, Self and Society* (Mead, 1934/1962), moved his ideas from the realm of oral to that of written tradition. Widely read to this day, this volume forms the main intellectual pillar of symbolic interactionism.
We deal with Mead’s ideas in Chapter 15, but it is necessary at this point to underscore a few points in order to situate him historically. Mead’s ideas need to be seen in the context of psychological behaviorism. Mead was quite favorably impressed with this orientation and accepted many of its tenets. He adopted its focus on the actor and his behavior. He regarded as sensible the behaviorists’ concern with the rewards and costs involved in the behaviors of the actors. What troubled Mead was that behaviorism did not seem to go far enough. That is, it excluded consciousness from serious consideration, arguing that it was not amenable to scientific study. Mead vehemently disagreed and sought to extend the principles of behaviorism to an analysis of the mind. In so doing, Mead enunciated a focus similar to that of Cooley. But whereas Cooley’s position seemed unscientific, Mead promised a more scientific conception of consciousness by extending the highly scientific principles and methods of psychological behaviorism.

Mead offered American sociology a social–psychological theory that stood in stark contrast to the primarily societal theories offered by most of the major European theorists (Shalin, 2011). The most important exception was Simmel. Thus, symbolic interactionism was developed, in large part, out of Simmel’s (Low, 2008) interest in action and interaction and Mead’s interest in consciousness. However, such a focus led to a weakness in Mead’s work, as well as in symbolic interactionism in general, at the societal and cultural levels.

**The Waning of Chicago Sociology**

Chicago sociology reached its peak in the 1920s, but by the 1930s, with the death of Mead and the departure of Park, the department had begun to lose its position of central importance in American sociology (Cortese, 1995). Fred Matthews (1977; see also Bulmer, 1984) pinpointed several reasons for the decline of Chicago sociology, two of which seem of utmost importance.

First, the discipline had grown increasingly preoccupied with being scientific—that is, using sophisticated methods and employing statistical analysis. However, the Chicago school was viewed as emphasizing descriptive, ethnographic studies (Prus, 1996), often focusing on their subjects’ personal orientations (in Thomas’s terms, their “definitions of the situation”). Park progressively came to despise statistics (he called it “parlor magic”) because it seemed to prohibit the analysis of subjectivity, the idiosyncratic, and the peculiar. The fact that important work in quantitative methods was done at Chicago (Bulmer, 1984:151–189) tended to be ignored in the face of its overwhelming association with qualitative methods.

Second, more and more individuals outside Chicago grew increasingly resentful of Chicago’s dominance of both the American Sociological Society and the *American Journal of Sociology*. The Eastern Sociological Society was founded in 1930, and eastern sociologists became more vocal about the dominance of the Midwest in general and Chicago in particular (Wiley, 1979:63). By 1935, the revolt against Chicago had led to a non-Chicago secretary of the association and the establishment of a new official journal, the *American Sociological Review* (Lengermann, 1979). According to Wiley, “the Chicago school had fallen like a mighty oak” (1979:63). This signaled the growth of other power centers, most notably Harvard and the Ivy League in general. Symbolic interactionism was largely an indeterminate, oral tradition and as such eventually lost ground to more explicit and codified theoretical systems such as the structural functionalism associated with the Ivy League (Rock, 1979:12).
Though it would never again be the center of American sociology, the Chicago school remained a force into the 1950s. Herbert Blumer (1900–1987) was a significant figure in the department until his departure for Berkeley in 1952 (Blumer, 1969; Maines, 2005). He was a major exponent of the theoretical approach developed at Chicago out of the work of Mead, Cooley, Simmel, Park, Thomas, and others. In fact, it was Blumer who coined the term *symbolic interactionism* in 1937. Blumer played a key role in keeping this tradition alive through his teaching at Chicago and wrote a number of essays that were instrumental in keeping symbolic interactionism vital into the 1950s. Whatever the state of the Chicago school, the Chicago tradition has remained alive to this day with major exponents dispersed throughout the country and the world (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine, 2001).

**Women in Early American Sociology**

Simultaneously with the developments at the University of Chicago described in the previous section, even sometimes in concert with them, and at the same time that Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel were creating a European sociology, and sometimes in concert with them as well, a group of women who formed a broad and surprisingly connected network of social reformers were also developing pioneering sociological theories. These women included Jane Addams (1860–1935), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964), Ida Wells-Barnett (1862–1931), Marianne Weber (1870–1954), and Beatrice Potter Webb (1858–1943). With the possible exception of Cooper, they can all be connected through their relationship to Jane Addams. That they are not today known or recognized in conventional histories of the discipline as sociologists or sociological theorists is a chilling testimony to the power of gender politics within the discipline of sociology and to sociology’s essentially unreflective and uncritical interpretation of its own practices. Although the sociological theory of each of these women is a product of individual theoretical effort, when they are read collectively, they represent a coherent and complementary statement of early feminist sociological theory.

The chief hallmarks of their theories, hallmarks that may in part account for their being passed over in the development of professional sociology, include (1) an emphasis on women’s experience and women’s lives and works being equal in importance to men’s; (2) an awareness that they spoke from a situated and embodied standpoint and therefore, for the most part, not with the tone of imperious objectivity that male sociological theory would come to associate with authoritative theory making (Lemert, 2000); (3) the idea that the purpose of sociology and sociological theory is social reform—that is, the end is to improve people’s lives through knowledge; and (4) the claim that the chief problem for amelioration in their time was inequality. What distinguishes these early women most from each other is the nature of and the remedy for the inequality on which they focused—gender, race, or class, or the intersection of these factors. But all these women translated their views into social and political activism that helped shape and change the North Atlantic societies in which they lived, and this activism was as much a part of their sense of practicing sociology as creating theory was. They believed in social science research as part of both their theoretical and their activist enactments of sociology and were highly creative innovators of social science method.

**Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)**
Among these early women sociologists, Charlotte Perkins Gilman offered the most comprehensive theoretical statement. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Gilman was a member of the famous Beecher family. Although Gilman did not have a university position, she worked as a writer and public speaker, a calling for which she was in high demand. She published in a variety of forms, among them newspaper articles, fictional works, academic journal articles (including essays in the American Journal of Sociology), and academic books. Her most comprehensive theoretical statement was Women and Economics (1898/1966). In size, scope, and theoretical vision the book is equivalent to those published by her male contemporaries. In Women and Economics Gilman drew on evolutionary theory, specifically the ideas of Lester Ward. She described the evolution of what she called the sexuo-economic relation, and in particular, how modern society distorts basic human needs. Both women and men, she said, desire to be engaged in creative, independent work. However, women are trapped in domestic enslavement. They are required to work in service of male interests. The denial of the creative aspect of their being causes great suffering for women. Gilman believed that by using the tools of sociology, humans now had the capacity to overcome these gender inequalities. Informed by her theoretical ideas, she worked toward the establishment of a gender equitable social order. For these reasons, she was hailed, not only in the United States, but around the world, as one of the most important feminists of her time. These theories were also explored in popular fictional works such as The Yellow Wallpaper (1892/1973) and Herland (1915/1998). Although many of Gilman’s ideas about evolution are now outdated (as are those of Spencer and the early American male sociologists), her incisive analysis of gender inequality, grounded in both economy and culture, remains strikingly relevant.

The Du Bois-Atlanta School

At the same time that Small was developing the Chicago school and Gilman was writing Women and Economics, African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois was building what A. Morris (2015) calls the Du Bois-Atlanta school of sociology. Du Bois had studied with the most prestigious social scientists in Germany and had received a Ph.D. from Harvard. In 1897 he spent a year at the University of Pennsylvania during which time he researched and published his most important empirical work, The Philadelphia Negro (1897). That same year, Du Bois moved to Atlanta to teach history and economics. In the thirteen years that he was at Atlanta University, he founded a sociology department, led the first American scientific sociological laboratory, and wrote one of his most remembered works, The Souls of Black Folk (Du Bois, 1903/1996; A. Morris, 2015). In contrast to his empirical work, The Souls of Black Folk introduced a new style of sociological writing. It combined empirical data with poetic, autobiographical reflection and historical analysis.

The Du Bois-Atlanta school was dedicated to the study of black urban life. A. Morris described its mission like this: “sociological and economic factors were hypothesized to be the main causes of racial inequality that relegated black people to the bottom of the social order” (2015:58). The school, reflecting Du Bois’s own approach to scholarship, relied upon “multiple research methods” including fieldwork of the kind pioneered in The Philadelphia Negro (61). Black students, from across the United States came to Atlanta to study with Du Bois and to learn about his empirical social science. They believed that sociological research could be used to combat racial inequality, discrimination, and violence.
Du Bois was a striking and important figure in the development of Atlanta sociology. However, he was not alone in this endeavor. The Du Bois-Atlanta school was a school precisely because it brought together like-minded people engaged in research on a common set of problems. Before Du Bois arrived in Atlanta, Richard Wright Sr. had already initiated a “sociological orientation … that aligned with the new discipline” (A. Morris, 2015:61). Others members of this “first generation of black sociologists” included Monroe Work, Richard Wright Jr., and George Edmund Haynes (62). A central component to the work of the Atlanta school was the Atlanta annual conference. This meeting brought together black students, academics, and community members to share data and to launch new research studies. The conferences also attracted influential white scholars such as Jane Addams and anthropologist Franz Boas.

Despite his success, Du Bois resigned from Atlanta University in 1910 to take up more explicitly political work. Already in 1905 he had worked with Monroe Trotter to form the Niagara Movement, a civil rights organization dedicated to the critique of racial discrimination. In 1909 he helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and later became editor for the NAACP’s magazine, The Crisis. In The Crisis Du Bois wrote editorials that addressed problems faced by African Americans in the United States.

Throughout this varied career, Du Bois’s overarching interest was in the “race idea,” which he considered the “the central thought of all history” (Du Bois, 1897/1995:21), and the “color-line,” which he saw as drawn across not only the United States but across much of the world. One of his best-known theoretical ideas is the veil, which creates a clear separation, or barrier, between African Americans and whites. The imagery is not of a wall but rather of a thin, porous material through which each race can see the other but which nonetheless serves to separate the races. Another key theoretical idea is double consciousness, a sense of “two-ness,” or a feeling among African Americans of seeing and measuring themselves through others’ eyes. Although, during his lifetime, Du Bois’s work was ignored by the sociological mainstream, it is now clear that he offers both an important sociological theory of race and a unique approach to sociology more generally.
Sociological Theory to Midcentury

The Rise of Harvard, the Ivy League, and Structural Functionalism

We can trace the rise of sociology at Harvard from the arrival of Pitirim Sorokin in 1930 (Avino, 2006; Jeffries, 2005; Johnston, 1995). When Sorokin arrived at Harvard, there was no sociology department, but by the end of his first year one had been organized, and he had been appointed its head. Sorokin was a sociological theorist and continued to publish into the 1960s, but his work is surprisingly little cited today. Although some disagree (e.g., Tiryakian, 2007), the dominant view is that his theorizing has not stood the test of time very well. Sorokin’s long-term significance may well have been in the creation of the Harvard sociology department and the hiring of Talcott Parsons (who had been an instructor of economics at Harvard) for the position of instructor in sociology. Parsons became the dominant figure in American sociology for introducing European theorists to an American audience, for his own sociological theories, and for his many students who became major sociological theorists.

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979)

Although Parsons published some early essays, his major contribution in the early years was his influence on graduate students, many of whom became notable sociological theorists themselves. The most famous was Robert Merton, who received his Ph.D. in 1936 and soon became a major theorist and the heart of Parsonsian-style theorizing at Columbia University. In the same year (1936), Kingsley Davis received his Ph.D., and he, along with Wilbert Moore (who received his Harvard degree in 1940), wrote one of the central works in structural-functional theory, the theory that was to become the major product of Parsons and the Parsonsians. But Parsons’s influence was not restricted to the 1930s. Remarkably, he produced graduate students of great influence well into the 1960s.

The pivotal year for Parsons and for American sociological theory was 1937, the year in which he published *The Structure of Social Action*. This book was of significance to sociological theory in America for four main reasons. First, it served to introduce grand European theorizing to a large American audience. The bulk of the book was devoted to Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto. His interpretations of these theorists shaped their images in American sociology for many years. Second, Parsons devoted almost no attention to Marx or to Simmel (D. Levine, 1991a). As a result, Marxian theory continued to be largely excluded from legitimate sociology.

Third, *The Structure of Social Action* made the case for sociological theorizing as a legitimate and significant sociological activity. The theorizing that has taken place in the United States since then owes a deep debt to Parsons’s work (Lidz, 2011).

Finally, Parsons argued for specific sociological theories that were to have a profound influence on sociology. At first, Parsons was thought of, and thought of himself, as an action theorist (Joas, 1996). He seemed to focus on actors and their thoughts and actions. But by the close of his 1937 work and increasingly in his later work, Parsons sounded more like a structural-functional theorist focusing on large-scale social and cultural systems. Although Parsons argued that there was no contradiction between these theories, he became best
known as a structural functionalist, and he was the primary exponent of this theory, which gained dominance within sociology and maintained that position until the 1960s. Parsons's theoretical strength, and that of structural functionalism, lay in delineating the relationships among large-scale social structures and institutions.

Parsons's major statements on his structural-functional theory came in the early 1950s in several works, most notably *The Social System* (1951) (B. Barber, 1994). In that work and others, Parsons tended to concentrate on the structures of society and their relationship to each other. Those structures were seen as mutually supportive and tending toward a dynamic equilibrium. The emphasis was on how order was maintained among the various elements of society (Wrong, 1994). Change was seen as an orderly process, and Parsons (1966, 1971) ultimately came to adopt a neo-evolutionary view of social change. Parsons was concerned not only with the social system per se but also with its relationship to the other action systems, especially the cultural and personality systems. But his basic view on intersystemic relations was essentially the same as his view of intrasystemic relations; that is, they were defined by cohesion, consensus, and order. In other words, the various social structures performed a variety of positive functions for each other.

It is clear, then, why Parsons came to be defined primarily as a structural functionalist. As his fame grew, so did the strength of structural-functional theory in the United States. His work lay at the core of this theory, but his students and disciples also concentrated on extending both the theory and its dominance in the United States.

Although Parsons played a number of important and positive roles in the history of sociological theory in the United States, his work also had negative consequences (Holton, 2001). First, he offered interpretations of European theorists that seemed to reflect his own theoretical orientation more than theirs. Many American sociologists were initially exposed to erroneous interpretations of the European masters. Second, as already pointed out, early in his career Parsons largely ignored Marx, which resulted in Marx's ideas being on the periphery of sociology for many years. Third, his own theory as it developed over the years had a number of serious weaknesses. However, Parsons's preeminence in American sociology served for many years to mute or overwhelm the critics. Not until much later did the weaknesses of Parsons's theory, and of structural functionalism in general, receive a full airing.

But returning to the early 1930s and other developments at Harvard, we can gain a good deal of insight into the development of the Harvard department by looking at it through an account of its other major figure, George Homans.

George Homans (1910–1989)

A wealthy Bostonian, George Homans received his bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1932 (Homans, 1962, 1984; see also Bell, 1992). As a result of the Great Depression, he was unemployed but certainly not penniless. In the fall of 1932, L. J. Henderson, a physiologist, was offering a course in the theories of Vilfredo Pareto, and Homans was invited to attend; he accepted. (Parsons also attended the Pareto seminars.) Homans's description of why he was drawn to and taken with Pareto says much about why American
sociological theory was so highly conservative, so anti-Marxist:

I took to Pareto because he made clear to me what I was already prepared to believe…. Someone has said that much modern sociology is an effort to answer the arguments of the revolutionaries. As a Republican Bostonian who had not rejected his comparatively wealthy family, I felt during the thirties that I was under personal attack, above all from the Marxists. I was ready to believe Pareto because he provided me with a defense.

(Homans, 1962:4)

Homans’s exposure to Pareto led to a book, *An Introduction to Pareto* (coauthored with Charles Curtis), published in 1934. The publication of this book made Homans a sociologist even though Pareto’s work was virtually the only sociology he had read up to that point.

In 1934, Homans was named a junior fellow at Harvard, a program started to avoid the problems associated with the Ph.D. program. In fact, Homans never did earn a Ph.D., even though he became one of the major sociological figures of his day. Homans was a junior fellow until 1939, and in those years he absorbed more and more sociology. In 1939, Homans was affiliated with the sociology department, but the connection was broken by the war.

By the time Homans returned from the war, the Department of Social Relations had been founded by Parsons at Harvard, and Homans joined it. Although Homans respected some aspects of Parsons’s work, he was highly critical of Parsons’s style of theorizing. A long-running exchange began between the two men that later manifested itself publicly in the pages of many books and journals. Basically, Homans argued that Parsons’s theory was not a theory at all but rather a vast system of intellectual categories into which most aspects of the social world fit. Further, Homans believed that theory should be built from the ground up on the basis of careful observations of the social world. Parsons’s theory, however, started on the general theoretical level and worked its way down to the empirical level.

In his own work, Homans amassed a large number of empirical observations over the years, but it was only in the 1950s that he hit upon a satisfactory theoretical approach with which to analyze those data. That theory was psychological behaviorism, as it was best expressed in the ideas of his colleague at Harvard, the psychologist B. F. Skinner. On the basis of this perspective, Homans developed his exchange theory. We pick up the story of this theoretical development later in this chapter. The crucial point here is that Harvard and its major theoretical product, structural functionalism, became preeminent in sociology in the late 1930s, replacing the Chicago school and symbolic interactionism.

**Developments in Marxian Theory**

From the early 1900s to the 1930s, Marxian theory continued to develop largely independently of mainstream sociological theory. At least partially the exception to this was the emergence of the critical, or Frankfurt, school out of the earlier Hegelian Marxism.
The idea of a school for the development of Marxian theory was the product of Felix J. Weil. The Institute of Social Research was officially founded in Frankfurt, Germany, on February 3, 1923 (Jay, 1973; Wheatland, 2009; Wiggershaus, 1994). Over the years, a number of the most famous thinkers in Marxian theory were associated with the critical school, including Max Horkheimer (Schulz, 2007b), Theodor Adorno (Schulz, 2007a), Erich Fromm (McLaughlin, 2007), Herbert Marcuse (Dandaneau, 2007a), and, more recently, Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth.

The institute functioned in Germany until 1934, but by then things were growing increasingly uncomfortable under the Nazi regime. The Nazis had little use for the Marxian ideas that dominated the institute, and their hostility was heightened because many of those associated with it were Jewish. In 1934 Horkheimer, as head of the institute, came to New York to discuss its status with the president of Columbia University. Much to Horkheimer’s surprise, he was invited to affiliate the institute with the university, and he was even offered a building on campus. And so a center of Marxian theory moved to the center of the capitalist world. The institute stayed there until the end of the war, but after the war, pressure mounted to return it to Germany. In 1949 Horkheimer returned to Germany, and he took the institute with him. Although the institute moved to Germany, many of the figures associated with it took independent career directions.

It is important to underscore a few of the most important aspects of critical theory (Calhoun and Karaganis, 2001). In its early years, those associated with the institute tended to be fairly traditional Marxists, devoting a good portion of their attention to the economic domain. But around 1930, a major change took place as this group of thinkers began to shift its attention from the economy to the cultural system, especially the “culture industry” (Lash and Lury, 2007), which it came to see as the major force in modern capitalist society. This was consistent with, but an extension of, the position taken earlier by Hegelian Marxists such as Georg Lukács. To help them understand the cultural domain, the critical theorists were attracted to the work of Max Weber. The effort to combine Marx and Weber and thereby create “Weberian Marxism” (Dahms, 1997; Lowy, 1996) gave the critical school some of its distinctive orientations and served in later years to make it more legitimate to sociologists who began to grow interested in Marxian theory.

A second major step taken by at least some members of the critical school was to employ the rigorous social-scientific techniques developed by American sociologists to research issues of interest to Marxists. This, like the adoption of Weberian theory, made the critical school more acceptable to mainstream sociologists.

Third, critical theorists made an effort to integrate individually oriented Freudian theory with the societal and cultural-level insights of Marx and Weber. This seemed, to many sociologists, to represent a more inclusive theory than that offered by either Marx or Weber alone. If nothing else, the effort to combine such disparate theories proved stimulating to sociologists and many other intellectuals.

The critical school has done much useful work since the 1920s, and a significant amount of it is of relevance to sociologists. However, the critical school had to await the late 1960s before it was “discovered” by large numbers of American theorists.

Karl Mannheim and the Sociology of Knowledge
Brief mention should be made at this point of the work of Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) (Kettler and Meja, 1995; Loader, 2011; Ruef, 2007). Born in Hungary, Mannheim was forced to move first to Germany and later to England. He was influenced by the work of Marx on ideology, as well as that of Weber, Simmel, and the neo-Marxist Georg Lukács. Also of significance is his thinking on rationality, which tends to pick up themes developed in Weber’s work on this topic but deals with them in a far more concise and a much clearer manner (Ritzer, 1998).

He is best known, however, as the founder of an area of sociology called the sociology of knowledge, which continues to be important to this day (E. McCarthy, 1996; T. McCarthy, 2007; Stehr, 2001). Mannheim, of course, built on the work of many predecessors, most notably Karl Marx (although Mannheim was far from being a Marxist). Basically, the sociology of knowledge involves the systematic study of knowledge, ideas, or intellectual phenomena in general. To Mannheim, knowledge is determined by social existence. For example, Mannheim sought to relate the ideas of a group to that group’s position in the social structure. Marx did this by relating ideas to social classes, but Mannheim extended this perspective by linking ideas to a variety of different positions within society (e.g., differences between generations).

In addition to playing a major role in creating the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim is perhaps best known for his distinction between two idea systems—ideology and utopia (B. Turner, 1995). An ideology is an idea system that seeks to conceal and conserve the present by interpreting it from the point of view of the past. A utopia, in contrast, is a system of ideas that seeks to transcend the present by focusing on the future. Conflict between ideologies and utopias is an ever-present reality in society (Mannheim, 1931/1936).
Sociological Theory from Midcentury

Structural Functionalism: Peak and Decline

The 1940s and 1950s were paradoxically the years of greatest dominance and the beginnings of the decline of structural functionalism. In those years, Parsons produced his major statements that clearly reflected his shift from action theory to structural functionalism. Parsons’s students had fanned out across the country and occupied dominant positions in many of the major sociology departments (e.g., Columbia and Cornell). These students were producing works of their own that were widely recognized contributions to structural-functional theory.

However, just as it was gaining theoretical hegemony, structural functionalism came under attack, and the attacks mounted until they reached a climax in the 1960s and 1970s. There was an attack by C. Wright Mills on Parsons in 1959, and other major criticisms were mounted by David Lockwood (1956), Alvin Gouldner (1959/1967, 1970; see also Chriss, 2005a), and Irving Horowitz (1962/1967). In the 1950s, these attacks were seen as little more than “guerrilla raids,” but as sociology moved into the 1960s, the dominance of structural functionalism was clearly in jeopardy.

George Huaco (1986) linked the rise and decline of structural functionalism to the position of American society in the world order. As America rose to world dominance after 1945, structural functionalism achieved hegemony within sociology. Structural functionalism supported America’s dominant position in the world in two ways. First, the structural-functional view that “every pattern has consequences which contribute to the preservation and survival of the larger system” was “nothing less than a celebration of the United States and its world hegemony” (Huaco, 1986:52). Second, the structural-functional emphasis on equilibrium (the best social change is no change) meshed well with the interests of the United States, then “the wealthiest and most powerful empire in the world.” The decline of U.S. world dominance in the 1970s coincided with structural functionalism’s loss of its preeminent position in sociological theory.

Radical Sociology in America: C. Wright Mills

As we have seen, although Marxian theory was largely ignored or reviled by mainstream American sociologists, there were exceptions, the most notable of which is C. Wright Mills (1916–1962). Mills is noteworthy for his almost single-handed effort to keep a Marxian tradition alive in sociological theory. Modern Marxian sociologists have far outstripped Mills in theoretical sophistication, but they owe him a deep debt nonetheless for the personal and professional activities that helped set the stage for their own work (Alt, 1985–1986). Mills was not a Marxist, and he did not read Marx until the mid-1950s. Even then he was restricted to the few available English translations because he could not read German. Because Mills had published most of his major works by then, his work was not informed by a very sophisticated Marxian theory.

Mills published two major works that reflected his radical politics as well as his weaknesses in Marxian theory. The first was *White Collar* (1951), an acid critique of the status of a growing occupational category, white-
collar workers. The second was *The Power Elite* (1956), a book that sought to show how America was dominated by a small group of businessmen, politicians, and military leaders (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2006). Sandwiched in between was his most theoretically sophisticated work, *Character and Social Structure* (Gerth and Mills, 1953), coauthored with Hans Gerth (N. Gerth, 1993).

Mills’s radicalism put him on the periphery of American sociology. He was the object of much criticism, and he, in turn, became a severe critic of sociology. The critical attitude culminated in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Of particular note is Mills’s severe criticism of Talcott Parsons and his practice of grand theory.

Mills died in 1962, an outcast in sociology. However, before the decade was out, both radical sociology and Marxian theory (R. Levine, 2005) would begin to make important inroads into the discipline.

**The Development of Conflict Theory**

Another precursor to a true union of Marxism and sociological theory was the development of a conflict-theory alternative to structural functionalism. As we have just seen, structural functionalism had no sooner gained leadership in sociological theory than it came under increasing attack. The attack was multifaceted: structural functionalists were accused of such things as being politically conservative, unable to deal with social change because of their focus on static structures, and incapable of adequately analyzing social conflict. One of the results of this criticism was an effort on the part of a number of sociologists to overcome the problems of structural functionalism by integrating a concern for structure with an interest in conflict. This work constituted the development of conflict theory as an alternative to structural-functional theory. Unfortunately, it often seemed little more than a mirror image of structural functionalism with little intellectual integrity of its own.

The first effort of note was Lewis Coser’s (1956) book on the functions of social conflict (Delaney, 2005a; Jaworski, 1991). This work clearly tried to deal with social conflict from within the framework of a structural-functional view of the world. Although it is useful to look at the functions of conflict, there is much more to the study of conflict than an analysis of its positive functions.

The biggest problem with most of conflict theory was that it lacked what it needed most—a sound basis in Marxian theory. After all, Marxian theory was well developed outside of sociology and should have provided a base on which to develop a sophisticated sociological theory of conflict. The one exception here is the work of Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009).

Dahrendorf was a European scholar who was well versed in Marxian theory. He sought to embed his conflict theory in the Marxian tradition. Dahrendorf’s major work, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), was the most influential piece in conflict theory, but that was largely because it sounded so much like structural functionalism that it was palatable to mainstream sociologists. That is, Dahrendorf operated at the same level of analysis as the structural functionalists (structures and institutions) and looked at many of the same issues. (In other words, structural functionalism and conflict theory are part of the same paradigm.) Dahrendorf recognized that although aspects of the social system could fit together rather neatly, there also
could be considerable conflict and tension among them.

In the end, conflict theory should be seen as little more than a transitional development in the history of sociological theory. It failed because it did not go far enough in the direction of Marxian theory. It was still too early in the 1950s and 1960s for American sociology to accept a full-fledged Marxian approach. But conflict theory was helpful in setting the stage for the beginning of that acceptance by the late 1960s.

**The Birth of Exchange Theory**

Another important theoretical development in the 1950s was the rise of exchange theory (Molm, 2001). The major figure in this development is George Homans, a sociologist whom we left earlier, just as he was being drawn to B. F. Skinner’s psychological behaviorism. Skinner’s behaviorism is a major source of Homans’s, and sociology’s, exchange theory.

At first, Homans did not see how Skinner’s propositions, developed to help explain the behavior of pigeons, might be useful for understanding human social behavior. But as Homans looked further at data from sociological studies of small groups and anthropological studies of primitive societies, he began to see that Skinner’s behaviorism was applicable and that it provided a theoretical alternative to Parsonsian-style structural functionalism. This realization led in 1961 to Homans’s book *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*. This work represented the birth of exchange theory as an important perspective in sociology.
C. Wright Mills was born on August 28, 1916, in Waco, Texas (Dandaneau, 2007b; Domhoff, 2005; Hayden, 2006). He came from a conventional middle-class background: his father was an insurance broker, and his mother was a housewife. He attended the University of Texas and by 1939 had obtained both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree. He was an unusual student who, by the time he left Texas, already had published articles in the two major sociology journals. Mills did his doctoral work at, and received a Ph.D. from, the University of Wisconsin (Scimecca, 1977). He took his first job at the University of Maryland but spent the bulk of his career, from 1945 until his death, at Columbia University.

Mills was a man in a hurry (Horowitz, 1983). By the time he died at age forty-five from his fourth heart attack, Mills had made a number of important contributions to sociology.

One of the most striking things about C. Wright Mills was his combativeness; he seemed to be constantly at war (Form, 2007). He had a tumultuous personal life, characterized by many affairs, three marriages, and a child from each marriage. He had an equally tumultuous professional life. He seemed to have fought with and against everyone and everything. As a graduate student at Wisconsin, he took on a number of his professors. Later, in one of his early essays, he engaged in a thinly disguised critique of the ex-chairman of the Wisconsin department. He called the senior theorist at Wisconsin, Howard Becker, a “real fool” (Horowitz, 1983). He eventually came into conflict with his coauthor, Hans Gerth, who called Mills “an excellent operator, whippersnapper, promising young man on the make, and Texas cowboy à la ride and shoot” (Horowitz, 1983:72). As a professor at Columbia, Mills was isolated and estranged from his colleagues. Said one of his Columbia colleagues:

There was no estrangement between Wright and me. We began estranged. Indeed, at the memorial services or meeting that was organized at Columbia University at his death, I seemed to be the only person who could not say: “I used to be his friend, but we became somewhat distant.” It was rather the reverse.

(Cited in Horowitz, 1983:83)

Mills was an outsider, and he knew it: “I am an outlander, not only regionally, but down deep and for good” (Horowitz, 1983:84). In The Sociological Imagination (1959), Mills challenged not only the dominant theorist of his day, Talcott Parsons, but also the dominant methodologist, Paul Lazarsfeld, who also happened to be a colleague at Columbia.
Mills, of course, was at odds not only with people; he was also at odds with American society and challenged it on a variety of fronts. But perhaps most telling is the fact that when Mills visited the Soviet Union and was honored as a major critic of American society, he took the occasion to attack censorship in the Soviet Union with a toast to an early Soviet leader who had been purged and murdered by the Stalinists: “To the day when the complete works of Leon Trotsky are published in the Soviet Union!” (Tilman, 1984:38)

C. Wright Mills died in Nyack, New York, on March 20, 1962.

Homans’s basic view was that the heart of sociology lies in the study of individual behavior and interaction. He was little interested in consciousness or in the various kinds of large-scale structures and institutions that were of concern to most sociologists. His main interest was instead in the reinforcement patterns, the history of rewards and costs, that lead people to do what they do. Basically, Homans argued that people continue to do what they have found to be rewarding in the past. Conversely, they cease doing what has proved to be costly in the past. To understand behavior, we need to understand an individual’s history of rewards and costs. Thus, the focus of sociology should be not on consciousness or on social structures and institutions but rather on patterns of reinforcement.

As its name suggests, exchange theory is concerned not only with individual behavior but also with interaction between people involving an exchange of rewards and costs. The premise is that interactions are likely to continue when there is an exchange of rewards. Conversely, interactions that are costly to one or both parties are much less likely to continue.

Another major statement in exchange theory is Peter Blau’s *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, published in 1964. Blau basically adopted Homans’s perspective, but there was an important difference. Whereas Homans was content to deal mainly with elementary forms of social behavior, Blau wanted to integrate this with exchange at the structural and cultural levels, beginning with exchanges among actors but quickly moving on to the larger structures that emerge out of this exchange. He ended by dealing with exchanges among large-scale structures.

Although he was eclipsed for many years by Homans and Blau, Richard Emerson (1981) has emerged as a central figure in exchange theory (K. Cook and Whitmeyer, 2011). He is noted particularly for his effort to develop a more integrated micro-macro approach to exchange theory. Exchange theory has now developed into a significant strand of sociological theory, and it continues to attract new adherents and to take new directions (K. Cook, O’Brien, and Kollock, 1990; Szmatka and Mazur, 1996).

**Dramaturgical Analysis: The Work of Erving Goffman**

Erving Goffman (1922–1982) is often thought of as the last major thinker associated with the original Chicago school (Scheff, 2006; G. Smith, 2006; Travers, 1992; Tseelon, 1992); Gary Fine and Philip Manning (2000) have seen him as arguably the most influential twentieth-century American sociologist. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, Goffman published a series of books and essays that gave birth to dramaturgical analysis as a variant of symbolic interactionism. Although Goffman shifted his attention in his later years, he remained best known for his *dramaturgical theory* (Alieva, 2008; Manning, 2005a, 2005b, 2007).
Goffman’s best-known statement of dramaturgical theory, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, was published in 1959. To put it simply, Goffman saw much in common between theatrical performances and the kinds of “acts” we all put on in our day-to-day actions and interactions. Interaction is seen as very fragile, maintained by social performances. Poor performances or disruptions are seen as great threats to social interaction just as they are to theatrical performances.

Goffman went quite far in his analogy between the stage and social interaction. In all social interaction there is a *front region*, which is the parallel of the stage front in a theatrical performance. Actors both on the stage and in social life are seen as being interested in appearances, wearing costumes, and using props. Furthermore, in both there is a *back region*, a place to which the actors can retire to prepare themselves for their performance. Backstage or offstage, in theater terms, the actors can shed their roles and be themselves.

Dramaturgical analysis is clearly consistent with its symbolic-interactionist roots. It has a focus on actors, action, and interaction. Working in the same arena as traditional symbolic interactionism, Goffman found a brilliant metaphor in the theater to shed new light on small-scale social processes (Manning, 1991, 1992).

**The Development of Sociologies of Everyday Life**

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a boom (Ritzer, 1975a, 1975b) in several theoretical perspectives that can be lumped together under the heading of sociologies of everyday life (Douglas, 1980; Fontana, 2005; Schutte, 2007; Weigert, 1981).

**Phenomenological Sociology and the Work of Alfred Schutz (1899–1959)**

The philosophy of phenomenology (Srubar, 2005), with its focus on consciousness, has a long history, but the effort to develop a sociological variant of phenomenology (Ferguson, 2001) can be traced to the publication of Alfred Schutz’s *The Phenomenology of the Social World* in Germany in 1932 (Dreher, 2011; J. Hall, 2007; Prendergast, 2005; Rogers, 2000). Schutz was focally concerned with the way in which people grasp the consciousness of others while they live within their own stream of consciousness. Schutz also used intersubjectivity in a larger sense to mean a concern with the social world, especially the social nature of knowledge.

Much of Schutz’s work focuses on an aspect of the social world called the *life-world*, or the world of everyday life. This is an intersubjective world in which people both create social reality and are constrained by the preexisting social and cultural structures created by their predecessors. Although much of the life-world is shared, there are also private (biographically articulated) aspects of that world. Within the life-world, Schutz differentiated between intimate face-to-face relationships (“we-relations”) and distant and impersonal relationships (“they-relations”). Even though face-to-face relations are of great importance in the life-world, it is far easier for the sociologist to study more impersonal relations scientifically. Although Schutz turned away from consciousness and toward the intersubjective life-world, he did offer insights into consciousness, especially in his thoughts on meaning and people’s motives.

Overall, Schutz was concerned with the dialectical relationship between the way people construct social reality
and the obdurate social and cultural reality that they inherit from those who preceded them in the social world.

**Ethnomethodology**

Although there are important differences between them, ethnomethodology and phenomenology are often seen as closely aligned (Langsdorf, 1995). One of the major reasons for this association is that the creator of this theoretical perspective, Harold Garfinkel, was a student of Alfred Schutz at the New School. Interestingly, Garfinkel previously had studied under Talcott Parsons, and it was the fusion of Parsonsian and Schutzian ideas that helped give ethnomethodology its distinctive orientation.

Basically, *ethnomethodology* is the study of “the body of common-sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations [the methods] by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves” (Heritage, 1984:4). Writers in this tradition are heavily tilted in the direction of the study of everyday life (Sharrock, 2001). Whereas phenomenological sociologists tend to focus on what people think, ethnomethodologists are more concerned with what people actually do. Thus, ethnomethodologists devote a lot of attention to the detailed study of conversations. Such mundane concerns stand in stark contrast to the interest of many mainstream sociologists in such abstractions as bureaucracies, capitalism, the division of labor, and the social system. Ethnomethodologists might be interested in the way a sense of these structures is created in everyday life; they are not interested in such structures as phenomena in themselves.

In the last few pages, we have dealt with several micro theories—exchange theory, phenomenological sociology, and ethnomethodology. Although the last two theories share a sense of a thoughtful and creative actor, such a view is not held by exchange theorists. Nevertheless, all three theories have a primarily micro orientation to actors and their actions and behavior. In the 1970s, such theories grew in strength in sociology and threatened to replace more macro-oriented theories (such as structural functionalism, conflict theory, and neo-Marxian theories) as the dominant theories in sociology (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Ritzer, 1985).

**The Rise and Fall (?) of Marxian Sociology**

In the late 1960s, Marxian theory finally began to make significant inroads into American sociological theory (Cerullo, 1994). An increasing number of sociologists turned to Marx’s original work, as well as to that of many Marxists, for insights that would be useful in the development of a Marxian sociology. At first this simply meant that American theorists were finally reading Marx seriously, but later there emerged many significant pieces of Marxian scholarship by American sociologists.

American theorists were particularly attracted to the work of the critical school, especially because of its fusion of Marxian and Weberian theory (Calhoun and Karaganis, 2001). Many of the works have been translated into English, and a number of scholars have written books about the critical school (e.g., Jay, 1973; Kellner, 1993).

Along with an increase in interest came institutional support for such an orientation. Several journals devoted
considerable attention to Marxian sociological theory, including *Theory and Society*, *Telos*, and *Marxist Studies*. A section on Marxist sociology was created in the American Sociological Association in 1977. Not only did the first generation of critical theorists become well known in America, but second-generation thinkers, especially Jürgen Habermas, and even third-generation theorists such as Axel Honneth, received wide recognition.

Of considerable importance was the development of significant pieces of American sociology done from a Marxian point of view. One very significant strand is a group of sociologists doing historical sociology from a Marxian perspective (e.g., Skocpol, 1979; Wallerstein, 1974, 1980, 1989, 2011b). Another is a group analyzing the economic realm from a sociological perspective (e.g., Baran and Sweezy, 1966; Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). Still others are doing fairly traditional empirical sociology, but work that is informed by a strong sense of Marxian theory (e.g., Kohn, 1976). A relatively recent and promising development is spatial Marxism. A number of important social thinkers (Harvey, 2000; Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Soja, 1989) have been examining social geography from a Marxian perspective.

However, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of Marxist regimes around the world, Marxian theory fell on hard times in the 1990s. Some people remain unreconstructed Marxists; others have been forced to develop modified versions of Marxian theory (see the discussion, later in this chapter, of the post-Marxists; there is also a journal titled *Rethinking Marxism*). Still others have come to the conclusion that Marxian theory must be abandoned. Representative of the latter position is Ronald Aronson’s book *After Marxism* (1995). The very first line of the book tells the story: “Marxism is over, and we are on our own” (Aronson, 1995:1). This from an avowed Marxist! Although Aronson recognized that some will continue to work with Marxian theory, he cautioned that they must recognize that it is no longer part of the larger Marxian project of social transformation. That is, Marxian theory is no longer related, as Marx intended, to a program aimed at changing the basis of society; it is theory without practice. One-time Marxists are on their own in the sense that they can no longer rely on the Marxian project but rather must grapple with modern society with their "own powers and energies" (Aronson, 1995:4).

Aronson is among the more extreme critics of Marxism from within the Marxian camp. Others recognize the difficulties but seek in various ways to adapt some variety of Marxian theory to contemporary realities (Brugger, 1995; Kellner, 1995). Nevertheless, larger social changes have posed a grave challenge for Marxian theorists, who are desperately seeking to adapt to these changes in a variety of ways. Whatever else can be said, the “glory days” of Marxian social theory appear to be over. Marxian social theorists of various types will survive, but they are not likely to approach the status and power of their predecessors in the recent history of sociology.

Although neo-Marxian theory will never achieve the status it once had, it is undergoing a mini-renaissance (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2000) in light of globalization, perceptions that the rich nations are growing richer and the poor are growing poorer (Stiglitz, 2002), and the resulting worldwide protests against these disparities and other abuses. Many theorists believe that globalization has served to open the entire world, perhaps for the first time, to unbridled capitalism and the excesses that Marxists believe inevitably accompany it (Ritzer,
If that is the case, and if the excesses continue and even accelerate, we will see a resurgence of interest in Marxian theory, this time applied to a truly global capitalist economy.

The Challenge of Feminist Theory

Beginning in the late 1970s, precisely at the moment when Marxian sociology gained significant acceptance from American sociologists, a new theoretical outsider issued a challenge to established sociological theories—and even to Marxian sociology itself. This brand of radical social thought is contemporary feminist theory (Rogers, 2001).

In Western societies, one can trace the record of critical feminist writings back almost 500 years, and there has been an organized political movement by and for women for more than 150 years. In America in 1920, the movement finally won the right for women to vote, fifty-five years after that right had been constitutionally extended to all men. Exhausted and to a degree satiated by victory, the American women’s movement over the next thirty years weakened in both size and vigor, only to spring back to life, fully reawakened, in the 1960s. Three factors helped create this new wave of feminist activism: (1) the general climate of critical thinking that characterized the period; (2) the anger of women activists who flocked to the antiwar, civil rights, and student movements only to encounter the sexist attitudes of the liberal and radical men in those movements (Densimore, 1973; Evans, 1980; Morgan, 1970; Shreve, 1989); and (3) women’s experience of prejudice and discrimination as they moved in ever-larger numbers into wage work and higher education (Bookman and Morgen, 1988; Garland, 1988). For these reasons, particularly the last one, the women’s movement continued into the twenty-first century, even though the activism of many other 1960s movements faded. Moreover, during these years activism by and for women became an international phenomenon, drawing in women from many societies.

Initially, a major feature of this international women’s movement was a literature on women that made visible all aspects of women’s hitherto unconsidered lives and experiences. This literature, which was popularly referred to as women’s studies, is the work of an international and interdisciplinary community of writers, located both within and outside universities and writing for both the general public and specialized academic audiences. Through the 1990s these theories incorporated an intersectional approach (P. Collins, 1990). Intersectionality theorists argued that oppression and discrimination is not caused by any single social fact, but by a set of interacting forces such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability.

Most recently, feminist theories have expanded beyond the focus on women to include research on the categories of gender and sexuality more broadly. Much of this scholarship grows out of a perspective called queer theory. Queer theory developed through a series of key publications, academic conferences, political organizations, and published texts largely during the early 1990s. Its theoretical roots lie in a number of fields, including feminist studies, literary criticism, and, most notably, social constructionism and poststructuralism. Queer theory also has political sources, notably in the larger project of queer politics and of groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation. Academically, queer theory has strong early roots in the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Teresa de Lauretis.
Queer theory involves a range of intellectual ideas rooted in the contention that identities are not fixed and stable and do not determine who we are. Rather, identities are seen as historically and socially constructed processes that are both fluid and contested. Further, these identities need not be gay or lesbian. In fact, queer theory does not seek to explain homosexual or heterosexual identities by themselves, but rather approaches the homosexual/heterosexual divide as a figure of knowledge and power that orders desires, behaviors, social institutions, and social relations. Thus, although queer theory does take sexuality as one of its central concerns, it is a much broader intellectual project than gay and lesbian, or even sexuality, studies. Indeed, queer theory is a theory of social life more generally: all social institutions and identities are structured through sexual identifications and performances.

Feminist scholarship, along with work in intersectionality and queer theory, provides a probing, multifaceted critique that makes visible the complexity of the system that subordinates people on the basis of gender and sexuality. It looks at the world from the vantage points of gender and sexuality, with an eye to discovering the significant but unacknowledged ways in which gender, class, race, age, enforced heterosexuality, and geosocial inequality help create our world. This viewpoint dramatically reworks our understanding of social life. From this base, feminist theorists have begun to challenge sociological theory, especially its classical statements and early research.

Theories of Race and Colonialism

Another important challenge to modern sociological theory came in the form of theories of race and colonialism. Despite their importance to both modern history and the history of sociology, until recently, mainstream theorists have not paid race and colonialism much attention. Race is important because, as W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1996) pointed out, it is a central organizational feature of American, and global, society. All modern race theorists agree that race is not a natural, biological category. Instead, it is a social construction that changes over time and place. In this context, colonialism is important because it played a central role in the development of modern constructions of race. The concept of race, as we understand it today, did not exist before the colonial encounter (Omi and Winant, 2015). From the sixteenth through the mid-twentieth century, European nations established colonies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America, often through the use of violence. Racial hierarchies, supported by scientific theories, such as Social Darwinism, were used to legitimate racial violence and domination.

One of the most important theorists of race and, more specifically, colonialism was Frantz Fanon (1925–1961). Although he was a psychiatrist and philosopher, his ideas have influenced many social theories of race and colonialism. In Black Skin, White Masks Fanon (1952/2008) described the psychological impact of colonialism on colonial subjects. Similar to Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, he introduced the idea that colonial subjects have a “fractured” consciousness (1952/2008:170). In The Wretched of the Earth (1961/2004) Fanon developed a Marxian-inspired theory of colonial revolution. There he described the role that violent revolution plays in developing national consciousness and overcoming colonial domination.

By the mid-twentieth century most of the world was decolonized. In other words, most European nations gave up their colonies and returned political rule to national powers. However, postcolonial theorists argue that
despite decolonization, the basic power structures of colonialism remain intact. Postcolonial theory emerged in literary studies. As such, it emphasizes the role that culture plays in the establishment of colonial and postcolonial power. For example, Edward Said (1935–2003) shows how the scholarly field of Orientalism constructed negative, but widely influential, characterizations of “Oriental” societies (1978/2003). Also, research in the areas of postcolonial feminism and transnational feminism has discussed the ways in which women’s lives are impacted by the intersecting forces of race, class, gender, and colonialism. Because it is rooted in literary theory, postcolonial theory has not been widely adopted in sociology. This said, some sociologists have shown how postcolonial ideas can inform contemporary sociological thought in important ways (Go, 2013; Steinmetz, 2013).

In the United States, there are a number of influential theories of race. Broadly, the contemporary study of race is shaped by a critical perspective. This is reflected in critical race theory and critical theories of race and racism. Critical race theory originates in the realization that the civil rights movement of the 1960s had lost its momentum, and there was a need not only for a revivified social activism but also for new theorizing about race. Critical race theory examines the way in which the legal system reproduces racial inequality. Similarly, critical theories of race and racism draw attention to structural inequalities but ground their position in a broader sociological point of view. Sociological theorists have also developed more specific theories of race. For example, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) introduced a social constructionist theory of racial formation, and Edward Bonilla-Silva (2014) developed a theory of color-blind racism. Most recently, Emirbayer and Desmond (2015) introduced what they call a systematic theory of race. They argued that even though there is a rich tradition of empirical research on race, sociology has suffered because it has not had an overarching theory of race. Their approach relies upon Bourdieu’s concept of the “field,” and shows how race and racism is created and reproduced at multiple levels of the social order.

Finally, there is an emerging field of scholarship that attempts to overcome the legacies of racism and colonialism through a rejection, or at least reformulation, of Western knowledge. Here, theory itself is viewed as a kind of knowledge that is grounded in Western ideas that reproduce racial distinctions. To challenge the domination of Western theory, scholars such as Connell (2007) and some working in the field of Native studies (A. Simpson and Smith, 2014; L. Simpson, 2011) have drawn attention to social theories that originate in southern (India, Latin America, Iran) and indigenous cultures (Aboriginal Australians, Native North Americans). Like the feminist perspective described earlier, and the postmodern perspective described later, these theories challenge conventional ideas about what theory is and how it should be done.

**Structuralism and Poststructuralism**

One development that we have said little about up to this point is the impact of structuralism (Lemert, 1990). We can get a preliminary feeling for structuralism by delineating the basic differences that exist among those who support a structuralist perspective. There are those who focus on what they call the “deep structures of the mind.” It is their view that these unconscious structures lead people to think and act as they do. The work of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud might be seen as an example of this orientation. Then there are structuralists who focus on the invisible larger structures of society and see them as determinants of the actions
of people as well as of society in general. Marx is sometimes thought of as someone who practiced such a
brand of structuralism, with his focus on the unseen economic structure of capitalist society. Still another
group sees structures as the models they construct of the social world. Finally, a number of structuralists are
concerned with the dialectical relationship between individuals and social structures. They see a link between
the structures of the mind and the structures of society. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is most often
associated with this view.

As structuralism grew within sociology, outside sociology a movement was developing beyond the early
premises of structuralism: poststructuralism (Lemert, 1990; C. McCormick, 2007). The major representative of
poststructuralism is Michel Foucault (Dean, 2001; J. Miller, 1993); another is Giorgio Agamben. In his early
work, Foucault focused on structures, but he later moved beyond structures to focus on power and the linkage
between knowledge and power. More generally, poststructuralists accept the importance of structure but go
beyond it to encompass a wide range of other concerns.

Poststructuralism is important not only in itself but also because it often is seen as a precursor to postmodern
social theory (to be discussed later in this chapter). In fact, it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear line
between poststructuralism and postmodern social theory. Thus Foucault, a poststructuralist, is often seen as a
postmodernist, while Jean Baudrillard (1972/1981), who usually is labeled a postmodernist, certainly did work
that is poststructuralist in character.
Late Twentieth-Century Developments in Sociological Theory

While many of the developments discussed in the preceding pages continued to be important in the late twentieth century, in this section we describe three broad movements—micro-macro integration, agency-structure integration, and theoretical syntheses—that were of utmost importance in that era and are to this day.

Micro-Macro Integration

A good deal of recent work in American sociological theory has been concerned with the linkage between micro and macro theories and levels of analysis (Barnes, 2001; Berk, 2006; J. Ryan, 2005b). George Ritzer (1990) argued that micro-macro linkage emerged as the central problematic in American sociological theory in the 1980s, and it continued to be of focal concern in the 1990s. The contribution of European sociologist Norbert Elias (1939/1994) is an important precursor to contemporary American work on the micro-macro linkage and aids our understanding of the relationship between micro-level manners and the macro-level state (Kilminster and Mennell, 2011; van Krieken, 2001).

There are a number of examples of efforts to link micro and macro levels of analysis and/or theories. Ritzer (1979, 1981) sought to develop a sociological paradigm that integrates micro and macro levels in both their objective and their subjective forms. Thus, there are four major levels of social analysis that must be dealt with in an integrated manner—macro subjectivity, macro objectivity, micro subjectivity, and micro objectivity. Jeffrey Alexander (1982–1983) created a “multidimensional sociology” that deals, at least in part, with a model of levels of analysis that closely resembles Ritzer’s model. James Coleman (1986) concentrated on the micro-to-macro problem, and Allen Liska (1990) extended Coleman’s approach. Coleman (1990) then developed a much more elaborate theory of the micro-macro relationship based on a rational choice approach derived from economics (see the following section on agency-structure integration).

Agency-Structure Integration

Paralleling the growth in interest in the United States in micro-macro integration has been a concern in Europe for agency-structure integration (J. Ryan, 2005a; Sztompka, 1994). Just as Ritzer saw the micro-macro issue as the central problem in American theory, Margaret Archer (1988) saw the agency-structure topic as the basic concern in European social theory. While there are many similarities between the micro-macro and agency-structure literatures (Ritzer and Gindoff, 1992, 1994), there are also substantial differences. For example, although agents are usually micro-level actors, collectivities such as labor unions can also be agents. And although structures are usually macro-level phenomena, we also find structures at the micro level. Thus, we must be careful in equating these two bodies of work and must take much care when trying to interrelate them.

Several major efforts in contemporary European social theory can be included under the heading of agency-structure integration. The first is Anthony Giddens’s (1984; Stones, 2005) structuration theory. Giddens’s
approach sees agency and structure as a “duality.” That is, they cannot be separated from one another: agency is implicated in structure, and structure is involved in agency. Giddens refused to see structure as simply constraining (as, e.g., did Durkheim) and instead sees structure as both constraining and enabling. Margaret Archer (1982) rejected the idea that agency and structure can be viewed as a duality, but instead sees them as a dualism. That is, agency and structure can and should be separated. In distinguishing them, we become better able to analyze their relationship to one another. Archer (1988) is also notable for having extended the agency-structure literature to a concern for the relationship between culture and agency and for developing a more general agency-structure theory (Archer, 1995).

Whereas both Giddens and Archer are British, another major contemporary figure involved in the agency-structure literature is Pierre Bourdieu from France (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Swartz, 1997). In Bourdieu’s work, the agency-structure issue translates into a concern for the relationship between habitus and field (A. F. Eisenberg, 2007). 

\[ \text{Habitus} \text{ is an internalized mental, or cognitive, structure through which people deal with the social world. The habitus both produces, and is produced by, the society. The } \text{field} \text{ is a network of relations among objective positions. The structure of the field serves to constrain agents, whether they are individuals or collectivities. Overall, Bourdieu is concerned with the relationship between habitus and field. The field conditions the habitus, and the habitus constitutes the field. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between habitus and field.} \]

The final major theorist of the agency-structure linkage is the German social thinker Jürgen Habermas. We have already mentioned Habermas as a significant contemporary contributor to critical theory. Habermas (1987b) has also dealt with the agency-structure issue under the heading of “the colonization of the life-world.” The life-world is a micro world where people interact and communicate. The system has its roots in the life-world, but it ultimately comes to develop its own structural characteristics. As these structures grow in independence and power, they come to exert more and more control over the life-world. In the modern world, the system has come to “colonize” the life-world—that is, to exert control over it.

The theorists discussed in this section are not only the leading theorists on the agency-structure issue, they were arguably (especially Bourdieu, Giddens, and Habermas) the leading theorists in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and their work continues to shape the discipline. Bourdieu has died, but Giddens and Habermas continue to write and comment on issues such as globalization and the environment. Perhaps the most influential contemporary theorist, Michel Foucault (to be discussed later), was French. After a long period of dominance by American theorists (Mead, Parsons, Merton, Homans, and others), the center of social theory seems to be returning to its birthplace—Europe. Furthermore, Birgitta Nedelmann and Piotr Sztompka argued that with the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism, we were about to “witness another Golden Era of European Sociology” (1993:1). This seems to be supported by the fact that today the works that catch the attention of large numbers of the world’s theorists are European. In addition, a new major social theory journal, the European Journal of Social Theory, appeared in 1998.

**Theoretical Syntheses**

The movements toward micro-macro integration and agency-structure integration began in the 1980s, and
both continued to be strong in the 1990s. They set the stage for the broader movement toward theoretical
syntheses, which began in the early 1990s. Reba Lewis (1991) has suggested that sociology’s problem
(assuming it has a problem) may be the result of excessive fragmentation and that the movement toward
greater integration may enhance the status of the discipline. What is involved here is a wide-ranging effort to
synthesize two or more different theories (e.g., structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism). Such
efforts have occurred throughout the history of sociological theory (Holmwood and Stewart, 1994). However,
there are two distinctive aspects of the recent synthetic work in sociological theory. First, it is very widespread
and not restricted to isolated attempts at synthesis. Second, the goal is generally a relatively narrow synthesis
of theoretical ideas, not the development of a grand synthetic theory that encompasses all of sociological
theory. These synthetic works are occurring within and among many of the theories discussed in this chapter.

Then there are efforts to bring perspectives from outside sociology into sociological theory. For example,
under the title “social and political thought” there are numerous research programs that attempt to draw
together political and social theory. Indeed, one of the founding principles of the aforementioned, newly
established European Journal of Social Theory is “to overcome the divide between social and political theory
with respect to the reinterpretation of the classics and the demands of the present situation” (Delanty, 1998:1;
see also B. Turner, 2009). The implication is that adequate analysis of the contemporary world situation
requires interdisciplinary perspectives. Major contemporary social theory journals such as Theory, Culture &
Society as well as Body & Society also embrace interdisciplinary perspectives. There also have been works
oriented to bringing biological ideas into sociology in an effort to create sociobiology (Crippen, 1994;
Maryanski and Turner, 1992) and more recently affect theory (Clough, 2008; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010;
Massumi, 2002). Rational choice theory is based in economics, but it has made inroads into a number of
fields, including sociology (Coleman, 1990; Heckathorn, 2005). Systems theory has its roots in the hard
sciences, but in the late twentieth century Niklas Luhmann (1984/1995) made a powerful effort to develop a
system theory that could be applied to the social world.
Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity

Toward the end of the twentieth century, social theorists were increasingly interested in the question of whether society (as well as theories about it) has undergone a dramatic transformation. On one side is a group of theorists (e.g., Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman, and Anthony Giddens) who believe that we continue to live in a society that still can best be described as modern and about which we can theorize in much the same way that social thinkers have long contemplated society. On the other side is a group of thinkers (e.g., Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Fredric Jameson) who contend that society has changed so dramatically that we now live in a qualitatively different, postmodern society. Furthermore, they argue that this new society needs to be thought about in new and different ways. The heated debate between modernists and postmodernists led to numerous theoretical developments that continue to influence the field.

The Defenders of Modernity

All the great classical sociological theorists (Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Du Bois, Simmel, and Gilman) were concerned, in one way or another, with the modern world and its advantages and disadvantages (Sica, 2005). Of course, the world has changed dramatically since the early twentieth century. Although contemporary theorists recognize these dramatic changes, there are some who believe that there is more continuity than discontinuity between the world today and the world that existed around the last fin de siècle.

Stjepan Meštrović (1988:2) has labeled Anthony Giddens “the high priest of modernity.” Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) uses terms such as “radical,” “high,” or “late” modernity to describe society today and to indicate that although it is not the same society as the one described by the classical theorists, it is continuous with that society. Giddens sees modernity today as a “juggernaut,” that is, at least to some degree, out of control. Ulrich Beck (1992, 2005b; Ekberg, 2007; Jensen and Blok, 2008; Then, 2007) contends that whereas the classical stage of modernity was associated with industrial society, the emerging new modernity is best described as a “risk society.” Whereas the central dilemma in classical modernity was wealth and how it ought to be distributed, the central problem in new modernity is the prevention, minimization, and channeling of risk (from, e.g., a nuclear accident). Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987a) sees modernity as an “unfinished project.” That is, the central issue in the modern world continues, as it was in Weber’s day, to be rationality. The utopian goal is still the maximization of the rationality of both the “system” and the “life-world.” Charles Taylor (1989, 2004, 2007) argues that contemporary selves and societies emerge out of cultural frameworks and moral ideals developed across the modern era. Ritzer (2015) sees rationality as the key process in the world today. However, he picks up on Weber’s focus on the problem of the increase in formal rationality and the danger of an “iron cage” of rationality. Weber focused on the bureaucracy. Today Ritzer sees the paradigm of this process as the fast-food restaurant, and describes the increase in formal rationality as the McDonaldization of society. Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011; Bauman and Lyon, 2012), has produced a series of basically modern analyses of what he calls the “liquid” world.

The Proponents of Postmodernity
At the end of the twentieth century, postmodernism was hot (Crook, 2001; Kellner, 1989; Ritzer, 1997; Ritzer and Goodman, 2001). Even though few would now call themselves postmodernists, postmodernism has had a major impact on social theory. We need to differentiate, at least initially, between postmodernity and postmodern social theory (Best and Kellner, 1991). Postmodernity is a historical epoch that is supposed to have succeeded the modern era, or modernity. Postmodern social theory is a way of thinking about postmodernity; the world is so different that it requires entirely new ways of thinking. Postmodernists would tend to reject the theoretical perspectives outlined in the previous section, as well as the ways in which the thinkers involved created their theories.

There are probably as many portrayals of postmodernity as there are postmodern social theorists. To simplify things, we summarize some of the key elements of a depiction offered by one of the most prominent postmodernists, Fredric Jameson (1984, 1991). First, postmodernity is a depthless, superficial world; it is a world of simulation (e.g., a jungle cruise at Disneyland rather than the real thing). Second, it is a world that is lacking in affect and emotion. Third, there is a loss of a sense of one’s place in history; it is hard to distinguish past, present, and future. Fourth, instead of the explosive, expanding, productive technologies of modernity (e.g., automobile assembly lines), postmodern society is dominated by implosive, flattening, reproductive technologies (television, e.g.). In these and other ways, postmodern society is very different from modern society.

Such a different world requires a different way of thinking. Pauline Rosenau (1992; see also Ritzer, 1997) defined the postmodern mode of thought in terms of the things that it opposes, largely characteristics of the modern way of thinking. First, postmodernists reject the kind of grand narratives that characterize much of classical sociological theory. Instead, postmodernists prefer more limited explanations, or even no explanations at all. Second, there is a rejection of the tendency to put boundaries between disciplines—to engage in something called sociological (or social) theory that is distinct from, say, philosophical thinking or even novelistic storytelling. Third, postmodernists are often more interested in shocking or startling the reader than they are in engaging in careful, reasoned academic discourse. Finally, instead of looking for the core of society (say, rationality or capitalistic exploitation), postmodernists are more inclined to focus on more peripheral aspects of society.

Although postmodern theory has reached its peak and now is in decline, it continues to exert a powerful impact on theory. On the one hand, new contributions to the theory continue to appear (e.g., Powell and Owen, 2007). On the other hand, it is very difficult to theorize these days without taking into account postmodern theory, especially its critiques of modern theorizing and its analyses of the contemporary world.
Social Theory in the Twenty-First Century

The debates surrounding theoretical integration and then modernism and postmodernism, although still relevant, have for the most part faded without clear resolution. This has left social theory, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, struggling for renewed identity (B. Turner, 2009). The major theoretical perspectives outlined in this review and detailed throughout this book will remain relevant and continue to grow. Theory will always ground itself in relationship to its history and the debates that history has entailed. This said, it is worth considering where theory is now and where it might be going. To this end, in this section we describe a number of thematic areas that are particularly relevant to social theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century: consumption and prosumption, globalization, and science and technology. Each of these areas has given rise to a variety of theoretical perspectives that are pushing social theory in new directions.

Theories of Consumption

Coming of age during the Industrial Revolution and animated by its problems and prospects, sociological theory has long had a “productivist bias.” That is, theories have tended to focus on industry, industrial organizations, work, and workers. This bias is most obvious in Marxian and neo-Marxian theory, but it is found in many other theories, such as Durkheim’s thinking on the division of labor, Weber’s work on the rise of capitalism in the West and the failure to develop it in other parts of the world, Simmel’s analysis of the tragedy of culture produced by the proliferation of human products, the interest of the Chicago school in work, and the concern in conflict theory with relations between employers and employees, leaders and followers, and so on. Much less attention has been devoted to consumption and the consumer. There are exceptions, such as Thorstein Veblen’s (1899/1994) famous work on “conspicuous consumption” and Simmel’s thinking on money (1907/1978) and fashion (1904/1971), but for the most part, social theorists have had far less to say about consumption than about production.

Postmodern social theory has tended to define postmodern society as a consumer society, with the result that consumption plays a central role in that theory (Venkatesh, 2007). Most notable is Jean Baudrillard’s (1970/1998) The Consumer Society. Lipovetsky’s (1987/1994) post-postmodern work on fashion is reflective of the growing interest in and out of postmodern social theory in consumption. Because consumption is likely to continue to grow in importance, especially in the West, and production is likely to decline, it is safe to assume that we will see a dramatic increase in theoretical (and empirical) work on consumption (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhoft, 2001; for an overview of extant theories of consumption, see Slater, 1997, 2005). To take one example, we are witnessing something of an outpouring of theoretically based work on the settings in which we consume, such as Consuming Places (Urry, 1995), Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption (Ritzer, 2010), and Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption (Humphery, 1998). We are likely to see much more work on such settings, as well as on consumers, consumer goods, and the process of consumption. A very new direction in this domain is work on prosumers, those who simultaneously produce and consume, especially on the Internet and Web 2.0 (e.g., blogs, Facebook) (Ritzer, 2009; Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson, 2012).
Theories of Globalization

Although there have been other important developments in theory in the early twenty-first century, it seems clear that the most important developments are in theories of globalization (Robinson, 2007). Theorizing globalization is nothing new. In fact, it could be argued that although classical theorists such as Marx and Weber lacked the term, they devoted much attention to theorizing globalization. Similarly, many theories (e.g., modernization, dependency, and world-system theory) and theorists (e.g., Alex Inkeles, Andre Gunder Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein) were theorizing about globalization in different terms and under other theoretical rubrics. Precursors to theorizing about globalization go back to the 1980s (and even before; see Moore, 1966; Nettl and Robertson, 1968) and began to gain momentum in the 1990s (Albrow, 1996; Albrow and King, 1990; Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1998; García Canclini, 1995; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez, 1997; Robertson, 1992). Such theorizing has really taken off in the twenty-first century (Beck, 2000, 2005a; Giddens, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004; Ritzer, 2004, 2007, 2009; J. Rosenau, 2003). Theories of globalization can be categorized under three main headings—economic, political, and cultural theories. Economic theories, undoubtedly the best known, can be broadly divided into two categories: theories that celebrate the neoliberal global economic market (e.g., T. Friedman, 2000, 2005; see Antonio, 2007, for a critique of Friedman’s celebration of the neoliberal market) and theories, often from a Marxian perspective (Collier, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Sklair, 1991), that are critical of it.

In political theory, one position is represented by the liberal approach (derived from the classical work of John Locke, Adam Smith, and others) (MacPherson, 1962), especially in the form of neoliberal thinking (J. Campbell and Pederson, 2001) (often called the “Washington consensus” [Williamson, 1990, 1997]), which favors political systems that support and defend the free market. On the other side are thinkers more on the left (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004; Harvey, 2005) who are critical of this view.

A central issue in political theory is the continued viability of the nation-state. On one side are those who see the nation-state as dead or dying in an era of globalization, or at least changing dramatically (Cerny, 2010). On the other side of this issue are defenders of the continued importance of the nation-state. At least one of them (J. Rosenberg, 2005) has gone so far as to argue that globalization theory has already come and gone as a result of the continued existence, even reassertion, of the nation-state (e.g., France and the Netherlands vetoing the EU constitution in 2005; the importance of various EU nations, especially Germany, in the ongoing euro crisis).

Although economic and political issues are of great importance, it is cultural issues and cultural theories that have attracted the most attention in sociology. We can divide cultural theories into three broad approaches (Pieterse, 2004). The first is cultural differentialism, in which the argument is made that among cultures there are deep and largely impervious differences that are unaffected or are affected only superficially by globalization (Huntington, 1996). Second, the proponents of cultural convergence argue that although important differences remain among cultures, there is also convergence, increasing homogeneity, across cultures (Boli and Lechner, 2005; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer et al., 1997; Ritzer, 2004, 2007, 2015). Third, there is cultural hybridization, in which it is contended that the global and the local interpenetrate to
create unique indigenous realities that can be seen as “glocalization” (Robertson, 1992, 2001), “hybridization” (García Canclini, 1995), and “creolization” (Hannerz, 1987). Much of the sociological thinking on globalization has been concerned with the issue, implied earlier, of the degree to which globalization is leading to homogenization or to heterogenization.

It seems clear that the various theories of globalization, as well as later variants of it that will come to the fore in the coming years, will continue to dominate new developments in sociological theory. However, other developments are worth watching.

Theories of Science, Technology, and Society

Another area of recent theoretical growth is captured under the term science and technology studies (also referred to as science, technology, and society studies and science studies; see Hess, 1997, for discussion of these differences). Some theorists in this field prefer to use the term technoscience to indicate the fusion of scientific knowledge with practical interventions into everyday life (Erikson and Webster, 2011).

This field studies how science and technology impacts social, cultural, and personal life. The field is quite diverse, often leading to very different ideas about how science and society are interrelated. For example, early theorists of science and society (such as Robert Merton) treated science as just one more social institution. Contemporary theorists tend to see science and society as more deeply intertwined and many have adopted a social constructionist perspective (see Erikson and Webster, 2011), meaning that science does not neutrally describe reality but actually structures social life and generates meanings and ideals. Donna Haraway (1991; Wirth-Cauchon, 2011) has argued that we now live in a technoscientific society that has turned people into cyborgs. The interest here is in the constitutive relationship, both positive and negative, between humans and technology and, more recently, humans and animals (see Haraway, 2008). Many contemporary theories of science also focus on the interrelationship among capitalism, politics, and technoscience. This has led to the widespread use (see Collier, 2011) of terms like Michel Foucault's biopolitics (the manipulation and control of populations through biological knowledge) and biocapital (the economic value produced through technoscientific research).

In terms of contributions to social theory more generally, actor-network theory is likely the most important perspective in science and technology studies. On one hand, it is part of the broad and increasing interest in networks of various kinds (e.g., Castells, 1996; Mizruchi, 2005). But on the other hand, it has a variety of unique orientations (Latour, 2007), not the least of which is its notion of the actant, which involves a number of obvious inclusions such as human agents but also includes a wide variety of nonhuman actors such as the Internet, ATMs, and telephone answering machines. This is in line with the move in the social world toward, and increasing scholarly interest in, the posthuman (Franklin, 2007) and the postsocial (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, 2005, 2007; Mayall, 2007). That is, we are increasingly involved in networks that encompass both human and nonhuman components, and in their relationships with the latter, humans are clearly in a posthuman and postsocial world.

The study of science and technology has also led theorists to a more interdisciplinary engagement with the
findings of the natural sciences. Historically, the most important of these perspectives is sociobiology, which
draws on evolutionary theory to make claims about the biological basis of human behavior (F. Nielsen, 1994).
Systems theorists such as Niklas Luhmann (1982, 1997/2012) and Kenneth Bailey (1994) draw on research in
cybernetics, biological science, and cognitive psychology, among others. Most recently, theorists in the area of
affect theory combine research in the life sciences with postmodern and poststructuralist ideas (Clough, 2008;
Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002). This emerging theoretical perspective takes a critical view of
mainstream science but nevertheless respects nature or matter as a force in itself, independent of culture and
society. The problem for affect theory is to understand how biology and society mutually influence each other.

We are now at the close of the chapter reviewing developments in contemporary theory, but we certainly have
not reached the end of theory development. One thing seems sure—the landscape of social theory is likely to
be dotted with more theories, none of them likely to gain hegemony in the field. Postmodernists have
criticized the idea of “totalizations,” or overarching theoretical frameworks. It seems unlikely that social theory
will come to be dominated by a single totalization. Rather, we are likely to see a field with a proliferating
number of perspectives that have some supporters and that help us understand part of the social world.
Sociological theory will not be a simple world to understand and to use, but it will be an exciting world that
offers a plethora of old and new ideas.
Summary

This chapter picks up where Chapter 1 left off and deals with the history of sociological theory since the beginning of the twentieth century. We begin with the early history of American sociological theory, which was characterized by its liberalism, by its interest in Social Darwinism, and consequently by the influence of Herbert Spencer. In this context, the work of the two early sociological theorists, Sumner and Ward, is discussed. However, they did not leave a lasting imprint on American sociological theory. In contrast, the Chicago school, as embodied in the work of people such as Small, Park, Thomas, Cooley, and especially Mead, did leave a strong mark on sociological theory, especially on symbolic interactionism. At the same time, early women sociologists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, theorized the relationship between gender and social inequality. In Atlanta, African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois founded a school grounded in his unique approach to sociology. The Du Bois-Atlanta school pioneered the use of multiple research methods. Its focal interest in race remains relevant to this day.

While the Chicago school was still predominant, a different form of sociological theory began to develop at Harvard. Pitirim Sorokin played a key role in the founding of sociology at Harvard, but it was Talcott Parsons who was to lead Harvard to a position of preeminence in American theory, replacing Chicago’s symbolic interactionism. Parsons was important not only for legitimizing “grand theory” in the United States and for introducing European theorists to an American audience but also for his role in the development of action theory and, more important, structural functionalism. In the 1940s and 1950s, structural functionalism was furthered by the disintegration of the Chicago school that began in the 1930s and was largely complete by the 1950s.

The major development in Marxian theory in the early years of the twentieth century was the creation of the Frankfurt, or critical, school. This Hegelianized form of Marxism also showed the influence of sociologists like Weber and of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Marxism did not gain a widespread following among sociologists in the early part of the century.

Structural functionalism’s dominance within American theory in midcentury was rather short-lived. Although traceable to a much earlier date, phenomenological sociology, especially the work of Alfred Schutz, began to attract significant attention in the 1960s. Marxian theory was still largely excluded from American theory, but Wright Mills kept a radical tradition alive in America in the 1940s and 1950s. Mills also was one of the leaders of the attacks on structural functionalism, attacks that mounted in intensity in the 1950s and 1960s. In light of some of these attacks, a conflict-theory alternative to structural functionalism emerged in that period. Although influenced by Marxian theory, conflict theory suffered from an inadequate integration of Marxism. Still another alternative born in the 1950s was exchange theory, which continues to attract a small but steady number of followers. Although symbolic interactionism lost some of its steam, the work of Erving Goffman on dramaturgical analysis in this period gained a following.

Important developments took place in other sociologies of everyday life (symbolic interactionism can be included under this heading) in the 1960s and 1970s, including some increase in interest in phenomenological
sociology and, more important, an outburst of work in ethnomethodology. During this period Marxian theories of various types came into their own in sociology, although those theories were seriously compromised by the fall of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This period also saw the development of feminist theories and the emergence of theories of race and colonialism. Also of note during this period was the growing importance of structuralism and then poststructuralism, especially in the work of Michel Foucault.

In addition to those just mentioned, three other notable developments occurred in the 1980s and continued into the 1990s. First was the rise in interest in the United States in the micro–macro link. Second was the parallel increase in attention in Europe to the relationship between agency and structure. Third was the growth, especially in the 1990s, of a wide range of synthetic efforts. Finally, there was considerable interest in a series of theories of modernity and postmodernity in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of several thematic areas that have occupied social theorists in the twenty-first century. We can expect increasing interest in consumption and prosumption and in theorizing about it. This relates to postmodern theory (consumer society is closely associated with postmodern society), reflects changes in society from an emphasis on production to consumption, as well as a reaction against the productivist bias that has dominated sociological theory since its inception. Theories of globalization have also played a prominent role in this most recent phase of sociological theory development. Contemporary theory is also concerned with the role that science and technology, or technoscience, play in the constitution of society. Major theories in this area are actor–network theory and affect theory.
Notes

1. See Bulmer (1985) for a discussion of what defines a school and why we can speak of the “Chicago school.” Tiryakian (1979, 1986) also deals with schools in general, and the Chicago school in particular, and emphasizes the role played by charismatic leaders as well as methodological innovations. For a discussion of this school within the broader context of developments in American sociological theory, see Hinkle (1994).

2. As we will see, however, the Chicago school’s conception of science was to become too “soft,” at least in the eyes of the positivists who later came to dominate sociology.

3. There were many other significant figures associated with the Chicago school, including Everett Hughes (Chapoulie, 1996; Strauss, 1996).

4. For a dissenting view, see J. Lewis and Smith (1980).

5. Addams, Gilman, Cooper, and Wells-Barnett were American. Weber was German and Potter was British.

6. This label fits some critical theorists better than others, and it also applies to a wide range of other thinkers (Agger, 1998).

7. The term social theorist rather than sociological theorist is used here to reflect the fact that many contributors to the recent literature are not sociologists, although they are theorizing about the social world.
PART II Classical Sociological Theory
3 Alexis de Tocqueville
Although Alexis de Tocqueville became a famous scholar and public figure after the publication of the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835 (the second volume was published in 1840), he has rarely been treated as one of the founders of sociology and sociological theory (Eberts and Witton, 1970). Yet, it is clear that there is a social theory, in particular a sociological theory, to be found in Tocqueville's work (Aron, 1965, 1979/2005; Meyer, 2003; Nisbet, 1966; Poggi, 1972).

Up to now, it has been mainly political scientists and political theorists who have recognized the importance of Tocqueville's social theory (although there have been exceptions in sociology; see, e.g., Calhoun, 1989; Pope, 1986). This was due, in part, to the fact that Tocqueville described his work as a "new political science," and that became the predominant view of his work. The long first volume of his classic *Democracy in America* (1835–1840/1969) was clearly a "scientific" analysis of the political structure of the United States and how it compared to other states, especially that of his native France. However, it has long been acknowledged that there is also a political sociology in his work, and from that it is but a short leap to conclude that there is a broader sociology and sociological theory to be found there, as well. His work is uneven in this regard. The second volume of *Democracy in America*, as Max Lerner (1969/1994:40; italics added) made clear, and which is abundantly obvious to any reader, is very different in many ways from the first, including being far more sociological and presenting "a new social theory of political man." This chapter downplays Tocqueville's contributions to an understanding of politics and governments, especially the unique characteristics of the early American government, and focuses more on his broader sociology and sociological theory.

However, there is no explicit "theory," especially "grand theory" of the type being produced at the time by Auguste Comte (see Chapter 4), in Tocqueville's work. In fact, he distrusted such theorizing. For example, in his posthumously published recollections, he says:

> I detest these absolute systems, which represent all of the events of history as depending upon great first causes linked by the chain of fatality, and which, as it were, suppress men from the history of the human race. They seem narrow, to my mind, under their pretense of broadness, and false beneath their air of mathematical exactness … many important historical facts can only be explained by accidental circumstances, and … many others remain totally inexplicable … chance … plays a great part in all that happens on the world's stage.
Yet, immediately after the preceding statement, Tocqueville (1893/1959:64) goes on to discuss the antecedent factors that shape chance—“the nature of institutions, the cast of mind and the state of morals”—and these constitute a very sociological orientation and offer the basis for a larger social theory. In fact, there are at least the rudiments of such a theory in Tocqueville’s work.

However, Tocqueville always had more specific and concrete goals in mind in his work such as explaining the reasons for American democracy and the French Revolution. Thus, to get at his theory one must look beyond and below the specifics of his work. There is a sophisticated theory there in which Tocqueville, among other things, reconciled macro and micro perspectives on the social and cultural world. Furthermore, Tocqueville avoided the extremes of thinking of culture as an epiphenomenon (as was true of early Marxists) or as an external and coercive (à la Emile Durkheim [see Chapter 7])—all-controlling—force. Tocqueville was also an empiricist, and he generally sought to embed, if not derive, his theory from the data he collected through interviews and observations (the base of Democracy), as well as through the analysis of historical records, documents, and archives (the base of his other famous work, The Old Regime and the French Revolution [Tocqueville, 1856/1983]).

Tocqueville was a contemporary of Auguste Comte’s in France, as well as overlapping significantly with the lives and at least early work of Karl Marx (Chapter 6) in Germany and Herbert Spencer (Chapter 5) and Harriet Martineau (Chapter 10) in England. Indeed, recent research has compared the respective contributions of Tocqueville and Martineau to early research on America (Hoecker-Drysdale, 2011). However, as far as we know, he was not influenced by any of them, and his work appeared not to affect their thinking.

Beyond his association with political science, another factor in the comparative invisibility of Tocqueville in histories of sociological theory is the fact that his views were seen as comparatively conservative (indeed, some were appropriated by the “new Right” and even Ronald Reagan; see Goldberg, 2001; Skocpol, 1997) and, as a result, were not seen as acceptable by many sociologists with more liberal or even radical leanings. Tocqueville was an aristocrat, and although he praised (sometimes) democracy, especially American democracy, he was a critic of equality because it went hand in hand with governmental centralization and therefore posed a profound threat to the freedom he so cherished. To take another example of Tocqueville’s conservatism, Boyd (2001) contended that in his later letters Tocqueville favored French colonialism in Algeria, argued that some peoples were better suited to self-government than others, and seemed to feel that there was some justification for the civilized to dominate and subjugate those who were barbarous (see also Janara, 2011).

A leading contemporary French theorist, Alain Touraine (1995), offered a characteristic critique of Tocqueville’s theory. Focusing on the second volume of Democracy in America, Touraine argued that Tocqueville contended that increasing equality leads to the danger of the concentration of power. This critique of increasing equality led, in Touraine’s (1995:70; italics added) view, to the fact that Tocqueville’s argument appealed “mainly to aristocrats and all those who remained attached to social and cultural traditions.”
In fact, Tocqueville (1835–1840/1969:230) did retain a favorable view of aristocracy as, for example, when he contended that the aristocrat “does not easily yield to the intoxication of thoughtless passion. An aristocratic body is a firm and enlightened man who never dies.” Tocqueville’s elite leanings are also clear in his argument that lawyers are the “only counterbalance to democracy” and its excesses in the United States.
Alexis de Tocqueville was born on July 29, 1805, in Paris. He came from a prominent aristocratic family, although they were not wealthy. The family had suffered during the French Revolution, and although his parents had been arrested, they managed to avoid the guillotine. Tocqueville was well educated, became a lawyer and judge (although not very successful at either), but more importantly became well—and widely—read, especially in the Enlightenment philosophy (Rousseau and Montesquieu) that played such a central role in much classical social theory.

The turning point in Tocqueville’s life began on April 2, 1831, when he and a friend (Gustave de Beaumont) journeyed to America ostensibly to study the American penitentiary system. He saw America as a laboratory in which he could study, in their nascent state, such key phenomena to him as democracy, equality, and freedom (Offe, 2005). He traveled widely throughout much of the then-developed (and some undeveloped) parts of the United States (and a bit of Canada), getting as far west as Green Bay (Wisconsin), Memphis (Tennessee), and New Orleans (Louisiana), traveling through large parts of the northeastern, middle Atlantic, and southern states, as well as some midwestern states east of the Mississippi River. He talked to all sorts of people along the way, asked systematic questions, took copious notes, and allowed his interest to evolve on the basis of what he found along the way. Tocqueville (and Beaumont) returned to France on February 20, 1832, having spent less than a year studying the vast physical and social landscape of the United States as it existed then.

It took Tocqueville some time to get started on the first volume of *Democracy in America*, but he began in earnest in late 1833, and the book was published by 1835. It was a great success and made him famous. The irony here is that one of the classic works on democracy in general, and American democracy in particular, was written by a French aristocrat. He launched a political career while putting the finishing touches on Volume Two of *Democracy*, which appeared in 1840. This book was more sociological (Aron, 1965) than the first, which was clearly about politics, particularly the American political system and how it compared to others, especially the French system (in general, he was very favorably disposed to the American system, although he had reservations about...
It was perhaps because of this shift in orientation, as well as the book's more abstract nature, that it was not well received.

Tocqueville continued in politics and, although an aristocrat, he was comparatively liberal in many of his views. Of this, he said:

People ascribe to me alternatively aristocratic and democratic prejudices. If I had been born in another period, or in another country, I might have had either one or the other. But my birth, as it happened, made it easy for me to guard against both. I came into the world at the end of a long revolution, which, after destroying ancient institutions, created none that could last. When I entered life, aristocracy was dead and democracy was yet unborn. My instinct, therefore, could not lead me blindly either to the one or the other.

(Tocqueville, cited in Nisbet, 1976:61)

It is because of this ambivalence that Robert Nisbet (1976:65) argued that unlike the development of Marxism flowing from Marx's intellectual certainty, "at no time has there been, or is there likely to be, anything called Tocquevilleism."

Tocqueville lived through the Revolution of 1848 and the abdication of the king. However, he opposed the military coup staged by Louis Napoleon, spent a few days in jail, and saw, as a result, the end of his political career (he had become minister of foreign affairs but was fired by Louis Napoleon). He never accepted the dictatorship of Napoleon III and grew increasingly critical of the political direction taken by France. As a way of critiquing the France of his day, Tocqueville decided to write about the French Revolution of 1879 (although he believed it continued through the first half of the nineteenth century and to his day) in his other well-known book, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, which was published in 1856. Although the book focused on French despotism, it continued the concerns of *Democracy in America* with the relationship among freedom, equality, and democracy. Unlike the second volume of *Democracy in America*, the *Old Regime* was well received and quite successful. It made Tocqueville the "grand old man" of the liberal movement of the day in France.

Tocqueville died at the age of fifty-three on April 16, 1859 (Mancini, 1994; Zunz and Kahan, 2002). One can gain a great deal of insight into the man and his thinking through *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Tocqueville, 1893/1959), his posthumously published memoirs of the Revolution of 1848 and his role in it.

Although largely ignored as a theorist in sociology, Tocqueville has played a role in the field, especially in work that has dealt with the issue of community, particularly its loss. For example, citations to Tocqueville are common in the all-time best-selling sociology book, David Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*. Indeed, quotations from Tocqueville's work are used as headers for a number of chapters in that book. Tocqueville is described as "brilliant" by Nisbet (1953:180) in his own community study, *Community and Power*. Tocqueville is the towering intellectual influence in another of the best-selling books in the history of sociology, Robert N. Bellah and colleagues' *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985). Indeed, the phrase "habits of the heart" is borrowed from Tocqueville (discussed later in this chapter). The book is concerned with ideas and issues that are dear to him, such as individualism and the threats it poses to community. In fact, the authors of *Habits of the Heart* describe *Democracy in America* as "the most comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the relationship between character and society in America that has ever been written" (Bellah et al., 1985:vii; italics added). Finally, the more recent and also best-selling *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by political scientist Robert Putnam is clearly in the Tocquevillian tradition and makes use of his ideas at various points in the book.

Outside of sociology, there is a strong and abiding interest in Tocqueville. For example, there is popular interest in books and articles written by people who have endeavored to replicate, at least in part and in ways, his journey through, and insights into, America (Cohen, 2001). There are societies and newsletters that bear
his name, and, of course, there continues to be an outpouring of scholarly books and articles that deal with his work.

What follows is a selective overview of Tocqueville’s contributions to social theory. We devote little time to what he says about the American government and much more to his thinking on the relationship between and among politics and the social world. It is certainly the case that issues like democracy, freedom, and equality are of enduring importance, but the specifics of what he said about them and their interrelationships are no more important than how he thought about and studied them. For example, as we discuss in the following section, Tocqueville was always comparing things in various ways; his work was an early exemplar of what came to be known as the comparative-historical method.

Yet, it is also the case that informing Tocqueville’s work is a concern for the big kinds of issues and questions that serve to make a theorist part of the canon. Perhaps the biggest issue of concern to him was the growth of centralization, especially centralized (and paternalistic) government. Associated with increasing equality, this centralization brings about a loss of freedom as the central government exerts both hard and soft controls over people. Thus, Tocqueville’s work offers a modern grand narrative (and is a product of the intellectual base of modernity, the Enlightenment, especially the philosophy of Montesquieu) of a historical trend in the direction of increasing equality, increasing centralization, and declining freedom. Thus, he also shares with the other great theorists a passion about an issue that informs his life work. Whereas for Marx it was capitalism, for Durkheim it was anomie, for Weber it was rationalization, and for Simmel it was the tragedy of culture, for Tocqueville it was centralization.

Interestingly, Tocqueville had more in common intellectually with the great German theorists than he did with his fellow French social thinker, Emile Durkheim. Like Marx, Weber, and Simmel, Tocqueville was most concerned about the growth of large-scale social and cultural structures and their negative impact on both the social world and the individual. In contrast, Durkheim was concerned about the decline of such phenomena (e.g., the collective conscience) and the negative impact of that on both society and the individual. Although it is appropriate to think of Tocqueville as a conservative in many ways, in comparison to Durkheim he aligns better with the more liberal and even radical theorists. The latter saw a structural problem and wanted to replace or modify the structure, whereas the conservative Durkheim wanted to strengthen, rather than weaken or reform, larger structures (e.g., occupational associations). Tocqueville certainly did not want to strengthen centralized government, but rather wanted to reform it, make it at least less centralized and therefore less of a threat to freedom.
Comparative Study

Tocqueville’s comparative methodology is most obvious in the first volume of Democracy in America, where he is constantly comparing governmental forms found in the United States to those found mainly in Europe, especially his home country of France. Although he wrote much about the United States, his ultimate focus and concern was France and what was to happen there. Most cases involved fairly casual kinds of comparisons; Tocqueville did not engage in the kinds of rigorous and systematic comparative studies that are now de rigueur in sociology. Nevertheless, his relentless use of this method yielded great insight into the nature of American government, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of the other nations he addressed.

Another kind of comparative analysis is involved in his propensity to compare democracy with aristocracy. Tocqueville, of course, was himself an aristocrat (see biographical sketch), and the France of his day still had strong aristocratic elements, as did the other European countries. He often compared them to the United States (with its lack of an aristocracy) and its democratic system. He turned again and again to a comparison of democracy and aristocracy, especially in the second volume of Democracy in America. What makes this analysis compelling is that the social variables he was analyzing change slightly from section to section, but in most cases he returned to contrast systematically each of those variables in an aristocratic and then in a democratic setting.

In his analysis of democracy as it was practiced in the United States, Tocqueville argued that it is easy to see the problems associated with it, especially in comparison to aristocracy, but one must dig much deeper to get at the advantages of democracy over aristocracy. In terms of disadvantages, an “aristocracy is infinitely more skillful in the science of legislation than democracy can ever be” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:232). Thus, the laws produced by an aristocracy are likely to be stronger, more complete, more timely, and less transitory than those produced by a democracy. However, in spite of these disadvantages, Tocqueville concluded that “democracy’s aim in its legislation is more beneficial to humanity than that of aristocracy in its lawmaking … that democratic government, for all its faults, is yet best suited of all to make society prosper” (232).

Advantages of democracy include the following:

1. Legislative mistakes are “retrievable.”
2. The “governed are more enlightened and alert.”
3. They are “constantly occupied … with their affairs and jealous of their rights.”
4. This prevents “their representatives from deviating from a general line indicated by their interests.”
5. Leaders have more interests in common with the masses, and even when they do not, they can do less harm because they generally hold their positions for shorter periods of time than those in aristocracies.

He concluded that the “real advantage of democracy is … to serve the well-being of the greatest number” (233). Even though the democratic leaders in America are “often inferior both in capacity and in morality to those whom an aristocracy might bring to power … they will never systematically follow a tendency hostile to the majority; they will never turn the government into something exclusive and dangerous” (233).
The following is a good summary of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two systems (as well as a use of the idea of “unanticipated” consequences [see italicized phrases in the following quotation] that Tocqueville employed many times and later would become a staple in sociological theory, although without acknowledging Tocqueville’s contributions to it; we also return to this idea in our discussion of his ideas on social change):

There is therefore at the bottom of democratic institutions some hidden tendency which often makes men promote the general prosperity, in spite of their vices and their mistakes, whereas in aristocratic institutions there is sometimes a secret bias which, in spite of talents and virtues, leads men to contribute to afflictions of their fellows. In this way it may come about that under aristocratic governments public men do evil without intending it, and in democracies they bring about good results of which they have never thought. (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:234–235; italics added)

It seems clear that in his comparison of aristocracy and democracy (and elsewhere) Tocqueville used what Max Weber later called ideal types as a methodological basis for his analysis (Nisbet, 1976). Although Tocqueville was not as self-conscious as Weber was about this methodology, he used it nonetheless. He clearly understood that these two political forms can have a wide range of empirical manifestations, and at least in the case of aristocracy he moved back and forth among the ways it manifested itself in various European societies. Yet, Tocqueville offered little in the way of empirical detail about any of these specific aristocracies, and he was most interested in generalizing, often in a very gross fashion. It is this profusion of great generalizations, generalizations that sometimes read like the grossest of stereotypes, that most dates Tocqueville’s work in *Democracy* and differentiates it, say, from Weber’s. Weber, after all, embedded his generalizations in comparative-historical research. Whereas Tocqueville did path-breaking research during his nearly year-long trip to and through America, he did no comparable research on democracy (and aristocracy) in the European societies about which he generalized. Thus, the unevenness of his data leads one to question the results of his comparative analyses, especially what he had to say about European societies. His conclusions about the United States are more credible even though he was prone to making generalizations, sometimes highly outrageous generalizations.

However, Tocqueville’s (1856/1983) comparative-historical research in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* is much more defensible and closer in quality to that of Weber. In this work he did original archival research in France to compare the state of the nation before versus after the French Revolution. Although this work did not have the impact that *Democracy* did, it is the stronger work, at least methodologically. That is, his methods allowed him to compare France before and after the revolution, whereas in *Democracy* his focus on data from his American journey made his comparative views on European political systems questionable because the latter were based on far more casual and less well-documented data.

Tocqueville was also unconstrained by the notion that his work ought to be value-free, or at least as value-free as possible (although he claimed to be impartial [Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:418]). Thus, although his
work is normally quite reasoned, his analysis is liberally studded with strong value judgments. Take, for example, the following passage from Volume Two of *Democracy in America* in which Tocqueville assails materialism (discussed again later in this chapter) in general, and American materialism in particular, by saying that there are many things about it that “offend me about the materialists. I think their doctrines pernicious, and their pride revolts me…. In all nations materialism is a dangerous malady of the human spirit, but one must be particularly on guard against it among a democratic people” (544; italics added).

By the way, Tocqueville’s often very pointed and acerbic views on this and many other issues (and people) are on display in the posthumously published *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville* (1893/1959). However, there are also important theoretical insights in that volume, some of which are to be found throughout this chapter.
American Politics

The first volume of *Democracy* is justly famous for its analysis of politics; it is seen as a landmark in the development of the field of political science. It is, as was pointed out earlier, a comparative study of the American political system (which is described as democratic, although the terms *democracy* and *American government* are not coterminous) and the political systems in other European countries, especially Tocqueville’s France. When he compared the specifics of these political systems, he almost always came down on the side of, and celebrated, the American political system. (This is interesting because he often equated “democracy” with “equality,” and he was, as we have seen and will see further, critical of equality, at least in terms of its long-term negative implications for freedom.) However, he was aware of the problems of the American democratic system and made it clear that he did not think “that American institutions are the only ones, or the best, that a democratic nation might adopt” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:231).

He basically saw America as a paradigm case of increasing democratization and as a model from which other nations, especially France, could learn. America was not perfect, he thought, but it had moved furthest in this direction. Furthermore, he was clear that France could create a system that was democratic but that was structured differently from the U.S. system. He looked at the U.S. political system for lessons, both positive and negative, for such a system. This constituted a unique opportunity for a researcher who was able to examine a society (the United States) from its beginnings and in its infancy. Thus, there are similarities between Tocqueville’s approach and that of Durkheim (1912/1965) in his study of Australian aborigines. That is, in looking at societies in their “infancy,” one is able to see things that would likely be hidden in more developed societies.

Tocqueville’s analysis of the American political system is not only quite dated, but it is liberally studded with contentions that, given the benefit of the hindsight of history, are clearly outrageous. However, it is also full of insights into that system and what it has to offer to other societies. What the United States has to offer is clear in comparison to European societies. The vast majority of these comparisons favor America. Indeed, to Tocqueville the United States was the society that was “the most enlightened and the freest” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:291). In spite of his positive view of the American democratic system, Tocqueville was not blind to its weaknesses (e.g., slavery).
The Sociology in Tocqueville’s Work

According to Tocqueville (1835–1840/1969:277) the “main object” of the first volume of *Democracy in America* was to explain the reasons why the United States was, and continued to be, a “democratic republic.” He saw three main reasons or causes, but it is the third, or sociological, cause that was the most important to him (and us). First, there are the *circumstances*, the *accidents of fate*, of the United States as, for example, its geography. Second, there are the *laws* of the United States. Third, there are American *habits and mores*.

Mores

It is the latter, especially mores, that Tocqueville saw as key to American democracy (Maletz, 2005). As he put it, “I should say that the contributions of physical causes is less than that of the laws, and that of laws less than mores” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:308). More generally, he concluded that the “importance of mores is a universal truth… I find it occupies the central position in my thoughts; all my ideas come back to it in the end” (308). He was drawing on a long tradition of work on the idea of mores, although he was broadening the concept and giving it unique meaning. He was most reliant on the work of Montesquieu, especially *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which the concept of mores plays a prominent role (Maletz, 2005). Here is the way Tocqueville (1835–1840/1969:287; italics added) defined *mores* (from the Latin *moeurs*), including using the now famous idea (see earlier) of “habits of the heart”:

> I mean it to apply not only to “moeurs,” in the strict sense which might be called habits of the heart, but also to the different *notions* possessed by men, the various *opinions* current among them, and the sum of *ideas* that shape *mental habits*. So I use the word to cover the whole moral and intellectual state of a people …

He went on to say that his goal was not to describe American mores in general, but only those that relate to its political institutions.

In contemporary terms, Tocqueville can be seen as attempting to understand American political institutions through an examination of American *culture* (“the whole moral and intellectual state”). It is that culture that explains the peculiar development of American democracy and *not* factors like its geography or its laws. This leads, of course, to the issue of exactly what those American mores are and what role they play in American democracy.

Although the idea of mores is introduced in the first volume of *Democracy*, that volume is clearly in the domain of political science. However, the second volume involves a great deal of sociological analysis. The focus shifts from politics to “civil society” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:417; see the following), and there is much more concern for the social problems associated with democracy. This is clear in the headings for the three parts that make up the second volume.

Part II (the first part in Volume Two; Part I was Volume One) is titled “The Influence of Democracy on the
Sentiments of the Americans.” This work analyzes the causal relationship between social structure (in this case the political structure of democracy) and the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, norms, and values—the “sentiments”—of individual Americans. This is clearest in the chapters about the relationship between democracy and Americans’ “more ardent and enduring love for equality than liberty” (a cardinal sin to Tocqueville), their “individualism” (another problem, at least mostly, for Tocqueville; see the following), their use of “associations in civil life,” their “taste for physical comfort,” the display by some of “enthusiastic forms of spirituality,” their restlessness, their “excessive love of prosperity” and the harm it can do, and their preference for “industrial callings.” All of the latter can be seen as the mores—“the moral and intellectual states”—alluded to earlier.

Part III turns to a focus on the causal relationship between democracy and “mores properly so called.” On the one hand, Tocqueville dealt with the relationship between democracy and a set of additional mores such as the ease and simplicity of relationships between Americans, the ease or difficulty with which they are offended, manners, pride, honor, ambition, and so on. In addition, he did what would now be called institutional analysis where he discussed the relationship between the political institution (democracy) and various other institutions such as the economy and work, the family, gender relations, and the military. This institutional focus and analysis is also apparent in his work on the French Revolution in which he argued, “Its principal and permanent cause was not that it was encouraged by various monarchs, but, rather, the slow, persistent action of our institutions” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:123). This kind of institutional analysis is not only highly sociological but also in tune with very contemporary work in sociology that focuses on institutions (the “new” institutionalism; e.g., W. Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

In Part IV Tocqueville reversed the causal relationship and examined the “Influence of Democratic Ideas and Feelings on Political Society.” That is, the concern is with how feelings and thoughts (also part of what Tocqueville included under the heading of mores) lead to structural changes in the democratic system. Here Tocqueville was concerned with how these feelings tend to lead to the concentration of political power and how this can lead to a kind of despotism.

Overall, Tocqueville was looking at causal relationships among macro structures (especially democracy), institutions, other large-scale cultural phenomena (e.g., mores, norms, and values), and more micro-level objective (behavior) and subjective phenomena (sentiments, feelings, beliefs, etc.). It could be argued that Tocqueville refused to distinguish between large-scale cultural phenomena and small-scale objective and subjective phenomena. To some, this constitutes a great advantage in his work, but to others it involves a conflation of various “levels” of analysis that would be better clearly distinguished from one another. At the minimum a wide variety of phenomena are included under the heading of mores that would be better carefully distinguished from one another. Nevertheless, Volume Two clearly adopts a very contemporary approach to sociology and to the causal analysis of sociological variables.

**Social Class**

Perhaps it is not surprising, given his aristocratic background and the threats to it, that Tocqueville’s writing has a very strong and modern sociological sense of the social class system. For example, he argued that prior to
the French Revolution the nobles treated the lower classes well, or at least better than they came to be treated after the revolution. But his deep sense of social classes and the differences in the ways in which they are treated is clear in the following on the way the old regime in France treated different classes:

The government of the old regime, which in its dealings with the upper classes was so lenient and so slow to take offense, was quick to act and often harsh to a degree where members of the lower orders, peasants especially, were concerned. Of all the many records I have examined, not one mentions the arrest of bourgeois under instructions from the Intendant [a government official]. Peasants, on the other hand, were constantly arrested in connection with levies of forced labor or the militia; for begging, for misdemeanors, and countless other minor offense. One class of the population could count on impartial tribunals, protracted hearings, and all the safeguards of publicity; the others were tried summarily by the provost, and there was no appeal.

(Tocqueville, 1856/1983:133; italics added)

Beyond exemplifying sociological analysis, Volume Two is notable for several sociological ideas that continue to be of great importance to sociology in general, and sociological theory in particular, although their ties to Tocqueville's work are not always acknowledged. Let us look at four of them—individualism, civil associations, materialism, and social change.

**Individualism**

Tocqueville is often credited with the “invention” of the term **individualism**. In fact, he claimed to have “coined” the term for his “own requirements” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:96). It not only has entered wide-scale general use but also has become an increasing concern in sociology and sociological theory. For example, it is one of the key ideas (often referred to as **individualization**) in the work of the important contemporary German social theorists Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gersheim (2002).

Tocqueville recognized that individualism was a new idea and that it needed to be contrasted to the older concept of egoism. (Here is another anticipation of later social theory, this time Durkheim’s thinking, especially as it relates to suicide, on egoism and the lack of social constraints [linked to individualism] involved in anomie.) He defined egoism as “a passionate and exaggerated love of self which leads a man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:506). In contrast, individualism is “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself” (506). Let us expand upon and highlight the key differences between these two concepts in Tocqueville’s conceptualization.

First, egoism “springs from a blind instinct; individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feeling” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:506). Individualism is misguided primarily because people are no longer involved with other people (except intimates) and things (especially communities) outside
themselves. The latter are left to run themselves; people more or less wash their hands of them and of involvement in them.

Second, egoism relates much more to feelings, whereas individualism is more closely tied to actions taken and not taken. In that sense, individualism is of far greater sociological consequence than egoism because it involves actions that can have quite material effects on the social world.

Third, egoism is “a vice as old as the world,” while “individualism is of democratic origin and threatens to grow as conditions get more equal” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:507). Thus, egoism is a more or less stable and universal phenomenon (it is an essentialistic idea), in contrast to individualism, which only came into existence (or at least Tocqueville so argued) in Tocqueville’s day, and he saw it as being apt to grow as democracy and equality increased. In other words, egoism seems to be associated with “human nature,” whereas individualism is a more genuinely sociological phenomenon that develops and changes with changing social conditions.

The biggest change, of course, that concerned Tocqueville is from aristocracy to democracy. In the aristocratic age, people “are almost always closely involved with something outside themselves” and “they are often inclined to forget about themselves.” Although this is not usually conscious or carefully thought out, “men do often make sacrifices for the sake of certain other men.” In the democratic age, in contrast, “the duties of each to all are much clearer but devoted service to any individual much rarer” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:507).

Clearly, at least in this case (and in others, as we will see), Tocqueville favored aristocracy over democracy and felt that the individualism associated with the latter was having an adverse effect on people and society. Help that would be given to others, as well as to the larger society, is lost with the result that both are worse off than before. People are worse off, too, as the individual “is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:508).

**Civil Associations**

Tocqueville’s (1835–1840/1969:513) discussion of the importance of “associations in civil life which have no political object” anticipated the enormous concern today in sociology, and elsewhere, in the importance of what is now called “civil society” (Lichterman, 2006; for a critique of this, see Skocpol, 1997). He was interested in, and was highly laudatory toward, the American propensity to form all sorts of civil associations—“religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:513)—and their positive impact on society. The great advantage of these civil associations is that people are able to interact with one another, and it is out of such interaction that “feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed” (515). Democratic societies tend to eliminate such interactions with the result that they need to be re-created through the creation and development of civil associations.

This is related to Tocqueville’s ever-present tendency to compare aristocratic and democratic societies. The basic argument is that there is no need for people in aristocratic societies to form such civil associations
because they are already held together quite firmly. However, the situation in democratic societies is very
different as is the need for such associations: “among democratic societies all the citizens are independent and
weak. They can do hardly anything for themselves, and none of them is in a position to force his fellows to
help him. They would all therefore find themselves helpless if they did not learn to help each other
voluntarily” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:514). In other words, the structure and nature of democratic
societies are conducive to the formation of civil associations.

Materialism

As we saw previously, Tocqueville was highly critical of materialism and was quite willing to express his values
on this issue. He saw materialism as a universal problem leading, for example, to “servitude” (Tocqueville,
1856/1983:118), but it was particularly acute in democratic societies. “Democracy favors the taste for physical
pleasures. This taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that nothing but matter exists.
Materialism, in its turn, spurs them on to such delights with mad impetuosity. Such is the vicious circle into
which democratic nations are driven” (544). Although materialism was also found in aristocratic societies,
Tocqueville associated aristocracies more with idealism, especially religion. In fact, he saw religion as a
“precious heritage from aristocratic times” and one that must be nurtured in democratic societies in order to
ward off the excesses of materialism (544).

Interestingly, Tocqueville recognized a variety of economic problems such as materialism, but unlike Marx
and many others, he traced them to democracy and not to the capitalist economic system. (To be fair, there
was, as yet, no concept of capitalism [Nisbet, 1976:65] and not much of that economic system was in place,
especially in America, at the point that Tocqueville undertook his journey there.) For example, he saw “the
recurrence of … industrial crises … [as] an endemic disease among all democratic nations in our day … it is
not due to accident but to the essential temperament [essentialism again!] of these people” (Tocqueville,
1835–1840/1969:554). Although his writing lacks the terminology (he later developed some of that
terminology with a sense that the “political struggle will be restricted to those who have and those who have
not; property will form the great field of battle” [Tocqueville, 1893/1959:11; italics added]), Tocqueville
described the emergence of a two-class system in the industrial system he associated with democracy. He saw
the division of labor (clearly influenced by Adam Smith) progressively weakening the worker and
strengthening the master. The former was growing progressively narrow in work and vision, while the latter
daily embraces a vast field in his vision, and his mind expands as fast as the other’s contracts. Soon the
[worker] will need no more than bodily strength without intelligence, while to succeed the [master]
needs science and almost genius. The [master] becomes more and more like the administrator of a huge
empire, and the [worker] more like brute…. One is in a state of constant, narrow, and necessary
dependence on the other and seems to have been born to obey, as the other was to command.

(Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:556)

Much of this could clearly have been written by Marx.
However, Tocqueville was restricted in his vision of this problem by his ties to an earlier time period. Thus, he interpreted this as the rise of a new “aristocracy.” Unlike the aristocracy of his romantic memory and image, however, this new one is a “monstrosity” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:557). Here is the way Tocqueville (557–558) contrasted the two aristocratic systems:

The territorial aristocracy of past ages was obliged by law, or thought itself obliged by custom, to come to the help of its servants and relieve their distress. But the industrial aristocracy of our day, when it has impoverished and brutalized the men it uses, abandons them in time of crisis to public charity to feed them.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville proceeded to make a very prophetic prediction based on this analysis about what came to be known as capitalism: “the friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed in that direction. For if ever again permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy make their way into the world, it will have been by that door that they entered” (558). Thus, even though Tocqueville may have romanticized some aspects of the aristocracy of the past, he was fully aware of the dangers it, especially in its new industrial form, posed for democracy.

Another contrast between Marx and Tocqueville lies in their views on equality/inequality and economic problems. To Marx, economic problems were the result of inequality in capitalism, but although Tocqueville recognized such inequality, he also argued that it is equality, not inequality, that leads to such problems. The basic logic here is in order to create distinctions in a largely equal world, people are driven to frenzied economic activities and an overemphasis on material goals.

Social Change

The issue of social change, especially revolution, occupies a central position in Tocqueville’s work. Whereas the American Revolution certainly involved major social changes, Tocqueville was less sure about the French Revolution (or rather revolutions, since he saw that as a continuing process from 1789 on). He certainly recognized that dramatic changes took place in France (including its increasing “savagery” [Tocqueville, 1856/1983:192]) and ultimately many other countries, but he was at pains to argue that in several very important respects it displayed continuity with the past rather than change. This is especially the case in terms of Tocqueville’s obsession with centralization.

He argued that the old, prerevolutionary order was characterized by centralization, and rather than overthrowing it, the revolution took it as its “starting-off point and one of its guiding principles” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:60). The revolution did not overthrow this form of administration. Rather, new forms of centralization proliferated both before and after the revolution: “this part of the old regime was to be taken over en bloc and integrated into the constitution of modern France” (60). Thus, counterintuitively, “the reason why the principle of centralization of power did not perish in the Revolution is that this very centralization was at once the Revolution’s starting point and one of its guiding principles” (60). The centralization that had characterized the old order was revived by the revolution and, in fact, has “been endorsed by all successive
governments” (60). And an important reason for this was the destruction of the aristocracy that had previously helped to counter centralization by forming at least a semi-autonomous power base and to moderate the tendency toward centralization. This all led Tocqueville to a generalization: “History, indeed, is like a picture gallery in which there are the originals and many copies” (65).

Tocqueville also argued that the revolution was not as advantageous as is usually supposed to parties assumed to have benefited from it. He acknowledged that during the old regime, the lower classes, especially the peasants, were treated poorly and were bad off. He also recognized that they were better off after the revolution in that they were free and became, to a modest degree, landowners. However, in another way they were worse off: “the way they were prevented from bettering themselves mentally and materially … strikes us today as so inhuman … they were left in a state of ignorance and often destitution worse than that of the serfs, their forefathers” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:133).

Represented here is a kind of view of history associated today with the French social theorist Michel Foucault, in which basic assumptions about the course of history are questioned and ultimately turned completely on their heads. For example, to Foucault (1980a), rather than the Victorian era leading to a suppression of sexuality, it bloomed. Of greater relevance to this discussion, instead of being treated better over time, prisoners (Foucault, 1979) and the mentally ill (Foucault, 1965) actually were, in many ways, more oppressed and repressed. Similarly, Tocqueville (1856/1983:121) argued that the material estrangement of the peasant in the old regime was replaced by a more “prevalent” and “pernicious” kind of spiritual estrangement after the revolution.

More generally, there is a pervasive sense of what later came to be known as “unanticipated consequences” (see earlier) in Tocqueville’s work on social change. In addition, he contended that increasing wealth leads not to more settled conditions but to greater unrest (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:175–176); increasing wealth also does not necessarily resolve economic problems but leads to new ones and perhaps even to revolution (179); increased enlightenment and improved conditions can stimulate, rather than retard, revolution (186); and, reminiscent of Marx, the elites and the king in the old regime are seen as spawning their own gravediggers. His most general statement on unanticipated consequences is found in his memoirs: “the destinies of this world proceed as the result, but often as the contrary result, of the intentions that produce them, similarly to the kite which flies by the antagonistic action of the wind and the cord” (Tocqueville, 1893/1959:26).
The Key Sociological Problem(s)

The key political issue to Tocqueville was the strength (and weakness) of democracy in general, and American democracy in particular, over aristocracy, especially as it existed in Europe, most often France and England. Although this issue is not devoid of sociology, it is much more an issue in political science than in sociology. However, in Volume Two of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville is much more of a sociologist, and clear sociological problems emerge in the course of it.

Stagnation

For starters, he feared that a democratic society would lead to a lack of boldness, ambition, pride, a “paltriness of aim,” too much humility (Tocqueville 1835–1840/1969:632). Later,

> If the citizens continue to shut themselves up more and more narrowly in the little circle of petty domestic interests and keep themselves constantly busy therein, there is a danger that they may in the end become practically out of reach of those great and powerful public emotions which do indeed perturb peoples but which also make them grow and refresh them. Seeing property change hands so quickly, and love of property become so anxious and eager, I cannot help fearing that men may reach a point where they look on every new theory as a danger, every innovation as a toilsome trouble, every social advance as a first step towards a revolution, and that they may absolutely refuse to move at all for fear of being carried off their feet. The prospect really does frighten me that they finally become so engrossed in a cowardly love of immediate pleasures that their interest in their own future and in that of their descendants may vanish, and that they will prefer tamely to follow the course of their destiny rather than make a sudden energetic effort necessary to set things right.

People suppose that the new societies are going to change shape daily, but my fear is that they will end up by being too unalterably fixed with the same institutions, prejudices, and mores, so that mankind will stop progressing and will dig itself in. I fear that the mind may keep folding itself up in a narrower compass forever without producing new ideas, that men will wear themselves out in trivial, lonely, futile activity, and that for all its constant agitation humanity will make no advance.

(Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:645)

Equality

If stagnation is an important problem in democracy, what did Tocqueville see as its causes? A key cause to him was *equality*. Despite the positive things he said about equality (it leads to compassion and gentleness [Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:565]), he was, in the main, critical of it, and it is this that, as pointed out earlier, sets him apart from the vast majority of sociologists and social theorists who are arch critics of inequality and in general favor equality.
Of equality, Tocqueville (1835–1840/1969:527; italics added) said that nothing can prevent increasing equality from turning men’s minds to look for the useful or disposing each citizen to get wrapped up in himself…. One must therefore expect that private interest will more than ever become the chief if not the only driving force behind all behavior…. If citizens, attaining equality were to remain ignorant and coarse, it would be difficult to foresee any limit to the stupid excesses into which their selfishness might lead them.

Whatever negative things one may say about aristocracies, and Tocqueville did not shrink from saying them, there was in his view less self-interested behavior, more other-oriented behavior, in such societies.

Although the end of aristocracy in the name of equality meant the end of “troublesome privileges,” it led to another problem: “When men are more or less equal and are following the same path, it is very difficult for any of them to walk faster and get out beyond the uniform crowd surrounding and hemming them in” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:537). Here we get closer to the crux of the problem in the democratic world as Tocqueville saw it: it brought with it a loss of creativity, the emergence of mediocrity. For all its faults, aristocratic regimes permitted inequality and therefore fostered creativity and excellence, albeit for the few who were part of the aristocracy.

Despotism

A related problem is that equality leads to despotism and to a further weakening of the individual: “everything in Europe seems to tend toward the indefinite extension of the prerogatives of the central power and to make the status of the individual weaker, more subordinate and more precarious” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:679). This is a counterintuitive argument since we tend to associate despotism with aristocratic regimes. However, Tocqueville argued that the trend for centuries had been for aristocracies to surrender power. In any case, the very nature of the exercise of power is more limited in aristocracies: “The social power in aristocracies was usually limited to directing and supervising the citizens in all matters immediately and patently connected with national interests. In all other respects they were left to freely choose for themselves” (681; italics added). In contrast, the democratic nations of his day seem to have held “themselves responsible for the behavior and fate of their subjects as individuals, and have undertaken to guide and instruct them in all they do, and will, if necessary, make them happy against their will” (681). (The latter is reminiscent of the views of the critical theorists and the ways in which the “culture industry” operates to control and stupefy people [Jay, 1973].)

Another factor in the increasing risk of despotism is the growing individualism discussed earlier. That is, as people grow more individualistic, become more removed from the broader social and political world, the field is left clear for the emergence and victory of a despot.

Centralization
Related to despotism is a parallel concern, and fear, in Tocqueville’s work for growing centralization, especially bureaucratic centralization in the state. He saw this as “the instinctive desire of every government” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:58). There is a mutual attraction between centralization and equality. As Nisbet (1976:73) put it, to Tocqueville, “all centralizing minds … are fond of equality, and all egalitarian minds are attracted to centralization.” He saw centralization as being accompanied by a loss of freedom as people surrendered far more, and far more readily, to bureaucratic “clerks” than they ever had before to the kings of aristocratic societies: “The citizens are perpetually falling under the control of the public administration. They are led insensibly, and perhaps against their will, daily to give up fresh portions of the individual independence to the government and those same men who from time to time have upset a throne and trampled kings beneath their feet bend without resistance to the slightest wishes of some clerk” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:688). Here we have intimations of not only the critical school but also Weber’s fears about bureaucracy and even of Foucault’s work.

Centralization is not only a key issue in the second volume of Democracy, but it occupies a similar place in The Old Regime and the French Revolution. There he argued that in the years leading up to the revolution, France underwent a process of increasing governmental administration. He saw this kind of centralized government as a very “modern” institution (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:57). Furthermore, this type of a modern form of government spread to other countries.

Thus, Tocqueville was expressing his deep fears about centralized control (and the closely linked democracy and equality) and especially the loss of freedom and liberty involved in the historical movement from aristocracy to democracy. In his recollections, Tocqueville (1893/1959:189–190) said: “In France there is only one thing we can’t set up: that is a free government; and only one institution we can’t destroy: that is, centralization.” And, he had little hope for the future: “For my part, I own that I have no confidence in the spirit of liberty which seems to animate my contemporaries. I see plainly enough that the nations of this age are turbulent, but it is not clear to me that they are freedom-loving. And I fear that at the end of all these agitations which rock thrones, sovereigns may be more powerful than ever before” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:689; italics added). In his later memoirs he was even clearer on this in arguing that centralization (and democratization) leads to a desire to hold public office and earn public money and that this is “the secret malady that has undermined all former governments, and which will undermine all governments to come” (Tocqueville, 1893/1959:32).

These new, more centralized administrations are more powerful in various ways. For one thing, they act “with greater speed, power, and independence” than had previous forms such as kingships (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:683). For another, anticipating Foucault’s (1980) work, they are seen by Tocqueville (1835–1840/1969:682) as “more inquisitive and minute.” That is, they intrude, and intrude more deeply, into peoples’ lives. Those who hold positions in government gain “pleasure” from “interfering with every one and holding everything in their hands” (Tocqueville, 1893/1959:190). Also similar to Foucault, “they would degrade men rather than torment them” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:691). It is a kind of “soft power” resembling more the power of parents over their children. It serves to keep citizens in a kind of perpetual childhood and “likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided that they think of nothing but enjoyment”
Along these lines, “It does not break men’s will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much from being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd” (692). Again, reminiscent of Foucault, this governmental control operates in a kind of “capillary” fashion in that it “extends its embrace to include the whole of society. It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform” (692).
Freedom, Democracy, and Socialism

If Tocqueville was critical of equality and centralization, it is because he was for freedom. It, or at least the desire for it, seems to be universal as far as he was concerned. However, it confronts powerful enemies, especially centralization. As a result, freedom was more endangered after the revolution than before because there was less centralization under the rule of the king than in postrevolutionary France. Centralization under the king did not have the same power it came to have in modern governments. The latter had less control over subordinates, at least in part because public offices were sold to them and thus deprived the old regime “of all the right of appointing or dismissing its officials at will” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:109). Furthermore, the old regime had fewer inducements to coerce, and fewer means of coercion, over subordinates. As a result, orders were often carried out halheartedly. The result of all of this was that it was easier for people to defend their freedom in the old regime than in modernity. The French Revolution itself had mixed effects on freedom (167), but overall it led to increased centralization and therefore to a reduction in the chances for freedom. Nevertheless, Tocqueville was not arguing for a return to the old regime because although there “was more freedom in that period [of the old regime] than there is today … it was a curiously ill-adjusted, intermittent freedom always restricted by class distinctions and tied up with immunities and privileges” (119). Whatever its weaknesses, there seemed to be more freedom in the old than the new regime, and the latter is able to mobilize far greater resources to limit, if not threaten, freedom.

If Tocqueville was critical of democracy for this trend toward centralization, and its adverse effects, he was even more critical of socialism, at least as it was articulated in the works on it in his day. To him, “socialism and centralization thrive in the same souls” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:164). Socialistic ideas tended to support state centralization. It was not only socialism’s association with centralization that Tocqueville found alarming, but also ideas like “community of property, the right to be provided with work, absolute equality, State control of all of the activities of individuals, despotic legislation, and the total submerging of each citizen’s personality in the group mind” (164; italics added). This can be seen as a prophetic set of criticisms, at least as socialism came to be practiced in the Soviet bloc countries.

Overall, Tocqueville was critical of both democracy and socialism for many of the same reasons, although he clearly saw the prospect of socialism as much more distasteful than democracy. Both tended to foster equality, centralization, and, worst of all, the loss of freedom.

What is the solution to these problems associated with the flow of history from aristocracy to democracy (and possibly socialism)? Given there is no going back to an older form of aristocracy, Tocqueville saw hope in a new form:

I am firmly convinced that one cannot found an aristocracy anew in this world, but I think that associations of plain citizens can compose very rich, influential and powerful bodies, in other words, aristocratic bodies…. By this means many of the greatest political advantages of an aristocracy could be obtained without its injustices and dangers … by defending its private interests against the
encroachments of power, it saves the common liberties.

(Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:697)

However, by his work on the French Revolution, Tocqueville seems to have grown less optimistic about the future and more nostalgic for the era of dominance of the nobles and other elites of the earlier French society such as the Catholic clergy and judicial officials. It was the relative independence of these elites that fostered greater freedom not only for themselves but for much of the rest of society. Their independence also created something of an inhibition, and counterbalance, to centralization. Thus, the centralization of prerevolutionary France was far less of a problem, and far less powerful, than it was to become after the revolution, and less centralization was equated by Tocqueville with greater freedom. It is this kind of thing that led him to write of the “dumb conformity” of his day and longingly of the “good sense of the past” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:115, 116). He also compared (unfavorably) the “servile mind” of the times to their ancestors’ greater freedom and “nobility of mind” (119).

It is for reasons like these that Tocqueville (1856/1983:77) wrote of the “catastrophic downfall of the monarchy.” Thus, to him the French Revolution was a disaster (even though he was well aware of past problems and that the revolution did away with at least some of them). And he had a low regard for the governments dominated by the middle class that followed (Tocqueville, 1893/1959:3). He saw the revolution as being less due to the impact of the prior American Revolution than to French ideas—especially such Enlightenment ideas as “natural law” and “rights of man”—and their “naïveté” (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:147). With the destruction of the established government (and religion), people were thrown into a state of confusion (something that greatly concerns Tocqueville): “They knew neither what to hold on to, nor where to stop. Revolutionaries of a hitherto unknown breed came on the scene; men who carried audacity to the point of sheer insanity … acted with an unprecedented ruthlessness” (157). Furthermore, Enlightenment ideas led to views on “the way the country should be governed that were not merely hard to reconcile with free institutions but practically ruled them out. They had come to regard the ideal social system as one whose aristocracy consisted exclusively of government officials and in which an all-powerful bureaucracy not only took charge of affairs of State but controlled men’s private lives” (167). Tocqueville waxed poetic about the freedom that has been lost: “that lofty aspiration … defies analysis … it is something one must feel and logic has no part in it. It is a privilege of noble minds which God has fitted to receive it, and it inspires them with a generous fervor … the sacred flame” (169).
Colonialism

Tocqueville lived during the historical period of colonialism and he wrote about colonization in both America and Algeria. As Laura Janara (2011) pointed out, in each of these instances, Tocqueville’s views on colonization were vastly different. In Democracy in America (1835–1840/2004) he wrote critically about the treatment of the “two unfortunate races” in America: “Negros” and “Indians.” These two groups of people “are alike only in their misfortunes…. Both suffer the effects of tyranny, and while their miseries are different, both can blame those miseries on the same tyrant” (366). The tyrant was European civilization and its incessant drive toward material wealth. European people exploited the American land with no thought for the effects of their activities on the land, the people who worked the land (African slaves) or the original inhabitants of the land (Native North Americans). Tocqueville’s criticism is connected to his theory of democracy. As Janara summarized, democracy “inflames the individual … lead[ing] him to look competitively in the direction of others.” This “fuel[s] the phenomenon of an entire people in ardent pursuit of material wealth, and presumably also the policies and practices designed to reduce and subordinate the continent’s first inhabitants” (2011:106).

This said, even in his criticism, Tocqueville relied on racialist ideas that were common during his time (see Chapter 11 for a more complete discussion of racialism). He treated Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans as distinct “races” with unique capacities. Although, at times, Tocqueville wrote with admiration about these different “races,” he also was clear that the European “race” marked the highpoint of civilizational development. As Janara (2011:106) put it, Tocqueville “elides indigenous peoples’ achievements and embraces those of Europeans, asserting that while Indians occupied the land they did not cultivate it, and thus did not own it.” Though critical of the treatment of these two races of people, Tocqueville was nevertheless convinced that European conquest was inevitable. Therefore he did not recommend decolonization or other efforts to limit colonial genocide (Janara, 2011).
New England Town Meeting: Historical Contexts

In Volume 1, Chapter 5 of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville wrote: “In the town as elsewhere the people are the source of all social power, but nowhere do they exercise their power more directly” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/2004:69). In particular, townspeople exercised their power through the institution of the town meeting. Despite its colonial origins, the town hall meeting remains “the distinguishing feature of town government in Massachusetts” (Zimmerman, 1999:27). Generally, these town meetings are taken to be models of direct democracy, which Tocqueville also likened to the democratic practices of ancient Athens. But where did the town meeting come from and what was it like?

Joseph Zimmerman (1999) traces the development of the town meeting to the early seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony. Most early towns were limited in size to between sixty and eighty families. These were “compact communities” that included a “village green, a meeting house and school” (Labaree, 1962:166).

Though later established under colonial law, the earliest town meetings were held in 1629 without the official authorization of colonial authorities (Zimmerman, 1999). All men were required to attend and participate, but only freemen (property owners and shareholders in the Massachusetts Bay Colony) were permitted to vote. The townspeople discussed and decided on basic issues of town governance: the division of land, the building of churches, the setting of taxes, and the admission of new town inhabitants (Zimmerman, 1999). As towns grew, and the administration of daily life became more onerous, town citizens elected selectmen—members of the community mandated to carry out duties determined at the town meetings (e.g., tax collection), in other words, town officials. The important point is that in contrast to a representative government in which citizens elect representatives to make law on their behalf, in the New England town, citizens directly made and oversaw the administration of the law.

In colonial New England, town meetings were feared by higher orders of government. This fear was quite practical. For example, Zimmerman (1999) says that the Massachusetts town meetings played a role in setting the stage for the Revolutionary War. The governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, General Thomas Gage, tried to ban the meetings but failed. Lord Germain, who was to become colonial secretary, believed that the town meetings were at the root of the Boston Tea Party. He said,

> This is what comes of their wretched town meetings—these are the proceedings of a tumultuous and riotous rabble, who ought, if they had the least produce, to follow their mercantile employment and not trouble themselves with politics and government, which they do not understand.

(Germain, quoted in Zimmerman, 1999:2)

Indeed, the practicalities of politics and revolution aside, town hall meetings were often criticized as an affront to reason, rule by mob rather than enlightenment. This fear of unruliness was expressed when, as Labaree (1962:172) describes, the town of Braintree voted “that it shall be considered as a disorder & treated as such for any person who shall git on the seats with their Feet in any part of the meeting House.”

Fears of democratic rabble-rousing aside, there is a common sociological point made by commentators: the town meeting was a unique place in which townspeople could establish a feeling of social cohesion and community. As we will see, the problem of social cohesion is central to the theories of later sociologists like Emile Durkheim.

Whereas he was critical of colonization in America, Tocqueville was a “leading advocate” for the French colonization of Algeria. Janara (2011:107) outlined three phases in Tocqueville’s thinking about Algeria. First, he recommended shared rule by the French and Arabs. Unlike the “three largely unassimilable peoples” of America, he believed that it was possible to develop an “amalgam civilization” in Algeria. Second, after having visited Algeria for the first time, he changed his mind. The two civilizations could not be brought together, but must be ruled through two legal systems as “two distinct societies” with the French in charge. He sanctioned “domination” which sometimes required, in Tocqueville’s words, “unfortunate necessities” such as “the burning of harvests and seizing of men, women, and children and their heirs” (quoted in Janara,
2011:107). Finally, after having visited Algeria a second time Tocqueville concluded that “the French alone should wield political power,” but backed down from his previous claims about domination, even suggesting that French domination has endangered “Muslim forms of knowledge.” These two very different views on colonization—one critical, one staunchly supportive—are likely attributable, as Janara suggested, to his position as a “French political actor.” Especially in Algeria, Tocqueville was writing not as a social scientist but as a person invested in “his democratizing country’s greatness” (Janara, 2011:107).

Like his elitist writings on inequality and the aristocracy, Tocqueville’s ideas about colonialism give the contemporary reader pause. Despite his criticism of American colonialism, his views on the differences between races, are clearly out of date and have no evidence to support them. His advocacy for French domination in Algeria is particularly troubling. The student of Tocqueville, then, will need to balance Tocqueville’s varied ideas about colonialism against his still very relevant reflections on democracy, individualization, centralization, and freedom, among others.
Contemporary Applications

We have already discussed a number of ways in which Tocqueville's ideas resonate with problems addressed by contemporary sociologists. For example, his concerns about individualism have influenced scholarship on the decline of community in America. His critique of centralization is similar to views voiced by classical theorist Max Weber and of continuing concern to contemporary theorists. Also, like current critics of consumer culture, Tocqueville was worried about the drift away from shared values toward materialism and individualistic pleasure-seeking. As would be expected, Tocqueville’s work has stimulated reflection on democracy. The tension between freedom and equality continues to be of interest. Does democratic equality, as Tocqueville worried, threaten freedom and reason? Or is the reverse more likely—that, as Rogers Smith (2010) wrote, contemporary forms of racial, class, and gender inequality threaten freedom and democratic decision making?

Perhaps Tocqueville’s most interesting impact has been on debate over participatory, or direct, democracy. Tocqueville admired the kind of democracy that he observed at town hall meetings in colonial New England (which presumably were like those practiced in ancient Athens). In those meetings all eligible citizens participated in political deliberation and the governance of society. In contrast, members of contemporary representative democracies do not directly contribute to governance but vote for representatives who act on their behalf. One criticism of representative democracy, especially in mass society, is that people feel disconnected and alienated from the political process. Given this concern, some, such as Lawrence Grossman (1996) have asked whether technologies like the Internet can revive participatory democracy. Neil Postman (1999:146) summarized Grossman’s argument this way:

The new interactive media will create the possibility of participatory democracy (as the Athenians practiced it) and will make representative democracy, as we now have it, obsolete. It will be possible for plebiscites to be held on every important question, so that citizens may decide directly and quickly on what qualities their government shall pursue.

Is this the kind of participatory democracy Tocqueville had in mind? Is it at least consistent with the principles of direct democracy? Postman (1999) is skeptical. Others, drawing on contemporary theorist Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, have attempted to develop more nuanced versions of how the Internet might serve democracy. Perhaps direct democracy, even with the Internet, is unachievable. But the Internet might work to enhance public discussion about political issues, in general, and thereby create a more engaged and informed citizenry (Gimmler, 2001). In all such cases, it is clear that Tocqueville's initial analysis of democracy continues to frame the debate.
Summary

Alexis de Tocqueville was a great social theorist, but he has not yet gotten his full due, especially in sociology where he has tended to be seen as a political scientist and therefore of minimal relevance to the field. Among the reasons that he has not received the credit and recognition due him are that he was avowedly an aristocrat, conservative by contemporary standards, and a critic of one of sociology’s “sacred cows,” that is, equality. Furthermore, the latter led him in the unpopular direction of favoring inequality. Also making it difficult to see the important theory in Tocqueville’s work is his deep hostility to abstract grand theory.

However, there clearly is an important theory in Tocqueville’s work that revolves mainly around the interrelationship of equality, centralization, and freedom. Overall, he saw greater equality favoring increasing centralization, especially in the government. Such centralization was a problem in itself, but most importantly because it tended to threaten what was most important to Tocqueville, that is, freedom. He envisioned the growth of an increasingly centralized government that would intrude ever more, and ever more deeply, into the lives of its citizens. It is this that lies at the heart of his critique of democracy and more importantly of socialism.

Beyond such a grand theory, Tocqueville also had a series of important insights into theoretical issues that are at the heart of sociology today. His emphasis on mores anticipated the cultural turn in recent social theory. His inclusion under the heading of mores of both micro (ideas, mental habits) and macro (the large culture) elements is in line with current interest in micro-macro and agency-structure integration (although it can also be seen as muddying that which needs to be distinguished). Tocqueville, like Marx, saw materialism as an important problem, although Tocqueville linked it to democracy rather than capitalism (which was not in existence in Tocqueville’s time and for which there was as yet no term). Also like Marx, Tocqueville had a strong sense of social class, of the emergence of a two-class system, and of the problems associated with such a system. Presaging the current interest in the topic, Tocqueville coined the term individualism, contrasted it to egoism, and saw the problems associated with it, primarily the decline in community interest and involvement, that interest so many today (e.g., Putnam). This is closely tied to his interest in civil associations as a counter to this trend, and this, too, is prescient given the current attention in sociology to civil society.

Finally, Tocqueville presented a broad theory of social change that is notable for its counterintuitive insights and for its emphasis on unanticipated consequences. It is not just that there is a lot more theory in Tocqueville’s work than most have realized; there is simply a great deal of powerful theorizing to be found there.

Finally, Tocqueville wrote about colonialism. He believed that colonization was inevitable in America, though he was critical of the effects that it had on both African slaves and Native Americans. In contrast, Tocqueville was supportive of the French colonization of Algeria and even expressed support for the violent practices of domination. These different views are likely attributable to his position as an advocate for the French state.
Notes

1. Nevertheless, there has been an enduring interest in Tocqueville’s work among a small number of sociologists. It was at the urging of one of them—Edward Tiryakian—that this chapter was developed.

2. However, there are varying views on the precise nature of those differences and where in Volume Two the differences begin.

3. In fact, Riesman was president of the Tocqueville Society.

4. Tocqueville’s study of the American political system is animated by the lessons that could be derived from it that would be of utility in improving the French political system in general and democracy in particular.

5. For example, “higher education is hardly available to anybody” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:55), “the President is an inferior and dependent power . . ., a docile instrument in the hands of the majority” (124, 138), the United States “has no great wars to fear” (169), there is “no religious hatred . . . no class hatred . . . no public distress” (177), “the federal government of the United States is tending to get daily weaker” (394).

6. As we saw earlier, the emphasis on chance and accidents is related to Tocqueville’s unwillingness to offer grand, all-encompassing theories.

7. It is worth noting that Tocqueville, as a child of the Enlightenment, was here, and throughout his work, doing a very “modern” form of sociological analysis. In many ways he was way ahead of his time, but this also led him to adopt a variety of modern approaches that now, in light of the postmodern critique (Ritzer, 1997), seem highly problematic. Among them are his tendencies to have essentialistic views of peoples, a desire to get to the heart of the matter or to get below surface appearances, and to argue often that there are “invariable rules of social behavior” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:59).

8. The concept does not appear as such in Marx’s work: it was first used by Pierre Proudhon in 1861 and took off after Werner Sombart used it in 1902 to describe the alternative economic system to socialism (Robbins, 2005:39).

9. This was also a concern in Volume One, where he distinguished between governmental and administrative centralization, and argued the United States had no administrative centralization and a high degree of governmental centralization. He felt that the latter was necessary for a nation to live and prosper. Administrative centralization “only serves to enervate peoples that submit to it, because it constantly tends to diminish civic spirit” (Tocqueville, 1835–1840/1969:88) Later, centralization is seen as excelling at “preventing, not doing” (91).

10. He also saw centralization as making the French Revolution more likely. In an earlier and less centralized France, movements toward revolution had been successfully resisted (Tocqueville, 1856/1983:204).

11. He also focused on other forms of centralization such as the growing centrality of Paris vis-à-vis the rest of
France. This also made the revolution easier because its success in Paris meant that the whole society would follow suit: “he who reigns in Paris governs France” (Tocqueville, 1893/1959:75). More importantly, centralization is linked to despotism, and the lack of administrative centralization acts as an impediment to despotism in the United States.

12. In other places he ridiculed socialistic ideas and finds them “ridiculous” (Tocqueville, 1893/1959:78, 237).
4 Auguste Comte
Chapter Outline

- Comte’s Profound Ambitions
- Comte’s Sociology
- Theory and Practice
- Criticisms and Contributions

Alfred North Whitehead said: “A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost” (1917/1974:115). Practitioners in an advanced science such as physics have forgotten the field’s founders, or at least they have relegated them to works on the history of the field. A student in physics does not ordinarily read about the work of Isaac Newton but rather about the contemporary state of knowledge on the issues that Newton and other classic physicists first addressed. The state of knowledge in contemporary physics has far outstripped that of Newton; hence, there is no need for a student to learn about his ideas. Newton’s still useful ideas have long since been integrated into the knowledge base of physics. According to Whitehead, physics is not lost; it has (largely) forgotten Isaac Newton and the other important figures in the early history of the field.

Why then are students in sociology being asked to read about the work of an early nineteenth-century thinker like Auguste Comte (1798–1857)? The fact is that in spite of a variety of weaknesses, a number of Comte’s ideas (e.g., positivism) continue to be important in contemporary sociology. More importantly, many more of his ideas were important in their time and had a significant impact on the development of sociology and sociological theory. Although sociological theory has progressed far beyond many of Comte’s ideas, sociology is not yet (and some say it will never be) in the position of physics, able to forget the work of its founders.
Comte’s Profound Ambitions

Positivism: The Search for Invariant Laws

Comte is remembered to this day in sociology for his championing of positivism (Halfpenny, 1982, 2001; Scharff, 1995; J. Turner, 1985a, 1990). Although this term has a multitude of meanings, it is usually used to mean the search for invariant laws of both the natural and the social world. In Comte’s version of positivism, these laws can be derived from doing research on the social world and/or from theorizing about that world. Research is needed to uncover these laws, but in Comte’s view the facts derived from research are of secondary importance to sound speculation. Thus, Comte’s positivism involves empirical research, but that research is subordinated to theory.

Comte’s thinking is premised on the idea that there is a real world (e.g., biological, sociological) out there and that it is the task of the scientist to discover and report on it. Because of this view, Comte is what we would now call a realist. Here is the way Comte put the issue: “Positive philosophers … approach the questions with the simple aim of ascertaining the true state of things, and reproducing it with all possible accuracy in their theories” (1830–42/1855:385). Later, Comte argued that positivist philosophy (or any philosophy) “can only be valid insofar as it is an exact and complete representation of the relations naturally existing” (1851/1957:8–9). (This is sometimes called the “copy theory” of truth.)

There are two basic ways of getting at the real world that exists out there—doing research and theorizing. Although Comte recognized the importance of research, he emphasized the need for theory and speculation. In emphasizing theory and speculation, Comte was at variance with what has now come to be thought of as positivism, especially pure empiricism through sensory observations and the belief in quantification. As Mary Pickering put it, “Comte would not recognize the mutilated version of positivism that exists today” (1993:697).

Although many contemporary sociologists think of themselves as positivists, positivism has come under severe attack in recent years. Considerable work in the philosophy of science has cast doubt on whether positivism fits the natural sciences, and this tends to raise even greater doubts about the possibility of positivistic sociology. Some sociologists (interpretationists) never accepted a positivist approach, and others who did have either totally abandoned it or adopted a modified positivist perspective (e.g., R. Collins, 1989a). Positivism has not disappeared from sociology, but it seems clear that sociology now finds itself in a postpositivist age (Shweder and Fiske, 1986).

Comte’s interest in positivism was intimately related to his interest in sociology. Comte “discovered” sociology in 1839. Consistent with his commitment to positivism, he defined sociology as a positivistic science. In fact, in defining sociology, Comte related it to one of the most positivistic sciences, physics: “Sociology … is the term I may be allowed to invent to designate social physics” (1830–42/1855:444).

Comte (1830–42/1855) developed a hierarchy of the positivistic sciences—mathematics, astronomy, physics, biology (physiology), chemistry, and at the pinnacle (at least in his early work)—sociology.1 (It is interesting
to note that Comte’s hierarchy leaves no place for psychology, which would seem to be reduced to a series of biological instincts.) This hierarchy descends from the sciences that are the most general, abstract, and remote from people to those that are the most complex, concrete, and interesting to people (Heilbron, 1990).

Sociology builds upon the knowledge and procedures of the sciences that stand beneath it, but in Comte’s view, sociology is “the most difficult and important subject of all” (1851/1968:31). Given his high estimation of sociology, it is easy to see why Comte has long been esteemed by sociologists. And given the fact that as a positivist, Comte viewed theorizing as the ultimate activity, it is clear why he has had such high status among theorists.

Comte explicitly identified three basic methods for sociology—three basic ways of doing social research in order to gain empirical knowledge of the real social world. The first is observation, but Comte was quick to reject isolated, atheoretical observations of the social world. Without theory, we would not know what to look for in the social world and we would not understand the significance of what we find. Observations should be directed by some theory, and when made, they should be connected to some law. The second of Comte’s methods is the experiment, but this method is better suited to the other sciences than it is to sociology. It is obviously virtually impossible to interfere with, and to attempt to control, social phenomena. The one possible exception would be a natural experiment in which the consequences of something that happens in one setting (e.g., a flood) are observed and compared to the conditions in settings in which such an event did not occur. Finally, there is comparison, which Comte divided into three subtypes. First, we can compare humans to lower animal societies. Second, we can compare societies in different parts of the world. Third, we can compare the different stages of societies over time. Comte found this last subtype particularly important; in fact, he labeled it the “chief scientific device” of sociology (1830–42/1855:481). It is so important that we separate it from the other comparative methods and accord it independent status as Comte’s fourth major methodology—historical research. In fact, John Stuart Mill saw this as one of Comte’s most important contributions in placing the “necessity of historical studies as the foundation of sociological speculation” (1961:86). In his own work, Comte used the historical method almost exclusively, although, as we will see, there are very real questions about how well he actually used this methodology.

Although Comte wrote about research, he most often engaged in speculation or theorizing to get at the invariant laws of the social world. He did not derive these laws inductively from observations of the social world; rather, he deduced them from his general theory of human nature. (A critic might ask questions such as: How did Comte derive his theory of human nature? Where did he get it from? How can we ascertain whether or not it is true?) In this way Comte (1891/1973:302–304) created a number of general positivistic laws, laws which he applied to the social world.

**Law of the Three Stages**

Comte’s most famous law is the *law of the three stages*. Comte identified three basic stages and argued that the human mind, people through the maturation process, all branches of knowledge, and the history of the world (and even, as we will see later, his own mental illness) *all* pass successively through these three stages. Each stage involves the search by human beings for an explanation of the things around them.

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1. **The Theological Stage** Comte saw the theological stage as the first stage and the necessary point of departure for the other two stages. In this stage, the human mind is searching for the essential nature of things, particularly their origin (where do they come from?) and their purpose (why do they exist?). What this comes down to is the search for absolute knowledge. It is assumed that all phenomena are created, regulated, and given their purposes by supernatural forces or beings (gods). Although Comte included *fetishism* (the worship of an object such as a tree) and *polytheism* (the worship of many gods) in the theological stage, the ultimate development in this stage is *monotheism*, or the worship of a single divinity that explains everything.

2. **The Metaphysical Stage** According to Comte, this stage is the least important of the three stages. It is a transitional stage between the preceding theological stage and the ensuing positivistic stage. It exists because Comte believed that an immediate jump from the theological to the positivistic stage is too abrupt for people to handle. In the metaphysical stage, abstract forces replace supernatural beings as the explanation for the original causes and purposes of things in the world. For example, mysterious forces such as “nature” are invoked to explain why things are the way they are (“it was an act of nature”). Mill gave as an example of a metaphysical perspective Aristotle’s contention that the “rise of water in a pump is attributed to nature’s horror of a vacuum” (1961:11). Or to take a more social example, we could say that an event occurred because it was the “will of the people.” Although numerous entities can be seen as causes in the metaphysical stage, its ultimate point is reached when one great entity (e.g., nature) is seen as the cause of everything.

3. **The Positivist Stage** This, of course, is the final and most important stage in Comte’s system. At this point people give up their vain search for original causes or purposes. All we can know are phenomena and the relations among them, not their essential nature or their ultimate causes. People drop such nonscientific ideas as supernatural beings and mysterious forces. Instead, they look for the invariable natural laws that govern *all* phenomena. Examinations of single phenomena are oriented toward linking them to some general fact. The search for these laws involves both doing empirical research and theorizing. Comte differentiated between concrete and abstract laws. Concrete laws must come inductively from empirical research, whereas abstract laws must be derived deductively from theory. Comte was much more interested in creating abstract laws than in creating concrete ones. Although positivism can be characterized by many laws, he saw it ultimately gravitating toward a smaller and smaller number of general abstract laws.

Although Comte recognized an inevitable succession through these three stages, he also acknowledged that at any given point in time all three might be operant. What he envisioned in the future of the world was a time when the positivistic stage would be complete and we would see the elimination of theological or metaphysical thinking.

Comte applied the Law of the Three Stages in a number of arenas. He saw people going through the three stages and viewed the child as a theologian, the adolescent as a metaphysician, and the adult as a positivist. He also saw all the sciences in his hierarchy going through each of these stages. (Because it was a new science in Comte’s time, sociology had not yet gone through the positivistic stage. Comte devoted much of his life to the development of positivistic sociology.) And he saw the history of the world in these terms. The early
history of the world was the theological stage; the world next went through the metaphysical stage; and during Comte’s lifetime the world was entering the last, or positivistic, stage. He believed that in the positivistic stage, people would come to better understand the invariant laws that dominate them and would be able to adapt to these laws “with fewer difficulties and with greater speed” (Comte, 1852/1968:383). These laws would also guide people in making choices that could expedite the emergence, but not alter the course, of inevitable social developments.

**Positivism: The Search for Order and Progress**

Although Comte used the term *positivism* in the sense of a science committed to the search for invariant laws, he also used it in another way—as the opposite of the negativism that, in his view, dominated the social world of his day. More specifically, that negativity was the moral and political disorder and chaos that occurred in France, and throughout Western Europe, in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789 (Levy-Bruhl, 1903/1973). Among the symptoms of this malaise were intellectual anarchy, political corruption, and incompetence of political leaders. Comte’s positive philosophy was designed to counter the negative philosophy and its symptoms that he found all around him.

But although Comte placed great blame on the French Revolution, he found the major source of the disorder to be intellectual anarchy. “The great political and moral crisis that societies are now undergoing is shown by a rigid analysis to arise out of intellectual anarchy” (Comte, 1830–42/1855:36). Comte traced that intellectual anarchy to the coexistence during his lifetime of all three “incompatible” philosophies—theological, metaphysical, and positivistic. Not only did all three exist at one time, but none of them at that point was very strong. Theology and metaphysics were in decay, in a “state of imbecility,” and positivism as it relates to the social world (sociology) was as yet unformed. The conflict among, and weaknesses of, these three intellectual schemes allowed a wide variety of “subversive schemes” to grow progressively more dangerous. The answer to this intellectual chaos clearly lay in the emergence of any one of them as preeminent, and given Comte’s law, the one that was destined to emerge supreme was positivism. Positivism had already become preeminent within the sciences (except sociology) and had brought order to each, where previously there was chaos. All that was needed was for positivism to bring social phenomena within its domain. Furthermore, Comte saw this as the way to end the revolutionary crisis that was tormenting France and the rest of Western Europe.

Comte also put this issue in terms of two of his great concerns—order and progress. From his point of view, theology offered a system of order, but without progress; it was a stagnant system. Metaphysics offered progress without order; he associated it with the anarchy of his day, in which things were changing in a dizzying and disorderly way. Because of the coexistence of theology and metaphysics (as well as positivism), Comte’s time was marked by disorder and a lack of progress. Positivism was the only system that offered both order and progress. On the one hand, positivism would bring order through the restraint of intellectual and social disorder. On the other hand, it would bring progress through an increase in knowledge and through perfection of the relationship among the parts of the social system so that society would move nearer, although never fully attain, its determinate end (the gradual expansion of human powers). Thus, positivism is the only stage in the history of humankind that offers us both order and progress.
Comte saw order and progress in dialectical terms, and in this sense he offered a perspective close to that of Marx (see Chapter 6). Comte refused to see order and progress as separate entities but viewed them as mutually defining and interpenetrating. “Progress may be regarded simply as the development of Order; for the order of nature necessarily contains within itself the germ of all positive progress…. Progress then is in its essence identical with Order, and may be looked upon as Order made manifest” (Comte, 1851/1957:116).

It is interesting and important to underscore the fact that in Comte’s view the crisis of his time was a crisis of ideas and that this crisis could be resolved only by the emergence of a preeminent idea (positivism). In fact, Comte often described positivism as a “spirit.” In this sense, Comte was an idealist: “Ideas govern the world” (1830–42/1855:36). On this issue, rather than being in accord with Marx, he stands in stark contrast to Marx (a materialist). Marx saw the capitalist crisis as stemming from the material conflict between capitalists and the proletariat, and he believed that its solution lay in a material revolution in which the economic system of capitalism would be overthrown and replaced by a communist system. Marx scoffed at the idea that he was dealing with a crisis of ideas that could be solved in the ideational realm. Marx was distancing himself from the idealism of Hegel; Comte, in contrast, had adopted a viewpoint that resembled, at least in a few respects, Hegelian idealism.
Auguste Comte: A Biographical Sketch

Auguste Comte was born in Montpelier, France, on January 19, 1798 (Pickering, 1993:7, 2011; Wernick, 2005). His parents were middle class and his father eventually rose to the position of official local agent for the tax collector. Although a precocious student, Comte never received a college-level degree. He and his whole class were dismissed from the Ecole Polytechnique for their rebelliousness and their political ideas. This expulsion had an adverse effect on Comte's academic career. In 1817 he became secretary (and “adopted son” [Manuel, 1962:251]) to Claude Henri Saint-Simon, a philosopher forty years Comte’s senior. They worked closely together for several years and Comte acknowledged his great debt to Saint-Simon: “I certainly owe a great deal intellectually to Saint-Simon … he contributed powerfully to launching me in the philosophic direction that I clearly created for myself today and which I will follow without hesitation all my life” (Durkheim, 1928/1962:144). But in 1824 they had a falling out because Comte believed that Saint-Simon wanted to omit Comte’s name from one of his contributions. Comte later wrote of his relationship with Saint-Simon as “catastrophic” (Pickering, 1993:238) and described him as a “depraved juggler” (Durkheim, 1928/1962:144). In 1852, Comte said of Saint-Simon, “I owed nothing to this personage” (Pickering, 1993:240).

Johan Heilbron (1995) described Comte as short (perhaps 5 feet, 2 inches), a bit cross-eyed, and very insecure in social situations, especially involving women. He was also alienated from society as a whole. Comte married Caroline Massin (the marriage lasted from 1825 to 1842). She was an illegitimate child who Comte later called a “prostitute,” although that label has been questioned recently (Pickering, 1997:37). Comte’s personal insecurities stood in contrast to his great security about his own intellectual capacities, and it appears as if this self-esteem was well founded:

Comte’s prodigious memory is famous. Endowed with a photographic memory he could recite backwards the words of any page he had read but once. His powers of concentration were such that he could sketch out an entire book without putting pen to paper. His lectures were all delivered without notes. When he sat down to write out his books he wrote everything from...
In 1826, Comte concocted a scheme by which he would present a series of seventy-two public lectures (to be held in his apartment) on his philosophy. The course drew a distinguished audience, but it was halted after three lectures when Comte suffered a nervous breakdown. He continued to suffer from mental problems, and once in 1827 he tried (unsuccessfully) to commit suicide by throwing himself into the Seine River.

Although he could not get a regular position at the Ecole Polytechnique, Comte had a minor position as a teaching assistant there in 1832. In 1837, Comte was given the additional post of admissions examiner, and this, for the first time, gave him an adequate income (he had often been economically dependent on his family until this time). During this period, Comte worked on the six-volume work for which he is best known, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, which was finally published in its entirety in 1842 (the first volume had been published in 1830). In that work Comte outlined his view that sociology was the ultimate science. He also attacked the Ecole Polytechnique, and the result was that in 1844 his assistantship there was not renewed. By 1851 he had completed the four-volume *Système de Politique Positive*, which had a more practical intent, offering a grand plan for the reorganization of society.

Heilbron argued that a major break took place in Comte’s life in 1838 and it was then that he lost hope that anyone would take his work on science in general, and sociology in particular, seriously. It was also at that point that he embarked on his life of “cerebral hygiene”; that is, Comte began to avoid reading the work of other people, with the result that he became hopelessly out of touch with recent intellectual developments. It was after 1838 that he began developing his strange ideas about reforming society that found expression in *Système de Politique Positive*. Comte came to fancy himself as the high priest of a new religion of humanity; he believed in a world that eventually would be led by sociologist-priests. (Comte had been strongly influenced by his Catholic background.) In spite of such outrageous ideas, Comte eventually developed a considerable following in France, as well as in a number of other countries.

Auguste Comte died on September 5, 1857.
Comte’s Sociology

We turn now more directly to Comte’s sociology, or his thoughts about the social world. Here we begin with another of Comte’s lasting contributions—his distinction between social statics and social dynamics. Although we do not use those terms today, the basic distinction remains important in the differentiation between social structure and social change. (By the way, Comte believed that all sciences, not just sociology, are divided into statics and dynamics.)

Social Statics

Comte defined the sociological study of social statics as “the investigation of the laws of action and reaction of the different parts of the social system” (1830–42/1855:457). Contrary to what one might think, the laws of the ways in which parts of the social system interact (social statics) are not derived from empirical study. Rather, they are “deduced from the laws of human nature” (Comte, 1852/1968:344–345). Here, again, we see Comte’s preference for theory over empirical research.

In his social statics, Comte was anticipating many of the ideas of later structural functionalists (see Chapter 16, on Parsons). Deriving his thoughts from biology (D. Levine, 1995a), Comte developed a perspective on the parts (or structures) of society, the way in which they function, and their (functional) relationship to the larger social system. Comte also saw the parts and the whole of the social system in a state of harmony. The idea of harmony was later transformed by structural functionalists into the concept of equilibrium. Methodologically, Comte recommended that because we know about the whole, we start with it and then proceed to the parts. (Later structural functionalists also came to grant priority to the whole [the “social system”] over the parts [the “subsystems”].) For these and many other reasons, Comte is often seen as a forerunner of structural functionalism.

Comte argued that “in Social Statics we must neglect all questions of time, and conceive the organism of society in its fullness…. Our ideal” (1852/1968:249). In other words, to use a concept developed by Weber (see Chapter 7), social statics describes an “ideal-typical” society. The system of social statics conceived by Comte never really existed; it was an idealized model of the social world at a given point in time. In order to construct such a model, the sociologist must, at least for the purposes of analysis, hold time still.

At a manifest level, Comte was doing a macrosociology of social statics (and dynamics) because he was looking at the interrelationship among the parts and the whole of the social system. Indeed, Comte explicitly defined sociology as the macro-level study of “collective existence” (1891/1973:172).

The Individual in Comte’s Theory

Comte’s isolated thoughts on micro-level individuals are important not only for understanding his social statics but also for comprehending many other aspects of his work. For example, the individual is a major source of energy in his social system. It is the preponderance of affect or emotion in individuals that gives energy and direction to people’s intellectual activities. It is the products of those intellectual activities that lead
to changes in the larger social system.

More important for understanding his social statics, as well as his overall view of the world, is the fact that Comte saw the individual as imperfect, dominated by “lower” forms of egoism rather than “higher,” more social forms of altruism. In fact, Comte believed this dominance of egoism was rooted in the brain, which he viewed as having both egoistic and altruistic regions. Egoism had higher energy, thereby helping to ensure the “natural feebleness” of altruism (Comte, 1852/1968:139). Putting egoism and altruism in slightly different terms, Comte argued, “Self-love … when left to itself is far stronger than Social Sympathy” (1851/1957:24–25). According to Comte (1852/1968:122), the chief problem of human life is the need for altruism to dominate egoism. He saw all the social sciences as being concerned with this problem and with the development of various solutions to it.

Thus, left to themselves, people will, in Comte’s view, act in a selfish manner. If we want to create a “better” world, the selfish motives of individuals must be controlled so that the altruistic impulses will emerge. Because egoism cannot be controlled from within the individual, the controls must come from outside the individual, from society. “The higher impulses within us are brought under the influence of a powerful stimulus from without. By its means they are enabled to control our discordant impulses” (Comte, 1851/1957:25–26). Thus Comte, like Durkheim (see Chapter 7), his successor within French sociology, saw people as a problem (egoism was a central concern to both) that could be handled only through external control over people’s negative impulses. In terms almost identical to those later used by Durkheim, Comte argued that “true liberty is nothing else than a rational submission to the … laws of nature” (1830–42/1855:435). Without such external controls,

our intellectual faculties, after wasting themselves in wild extravagancies, would sink rapidly into incurable sloth; our nobler feelings would be unable to prevent the ascendancy of the lower instincts; and our active powers would abandon themselves to purposeless agitation…. Our propensities are so heterogeneous and so deficient in elevation, that there would be no fixity or consistency in our conduct … without them [external restrictions] all its [reason’s] deliberations would be confused and purposeless.

(Comte, 1851/1957:29–30)

Comte concluded, “This need of conforming our Acts and our Thoughts to a Necessity without us, far from hampering the real development of our nature, forms the first general condition of progress towards perfection in man” (1852/1968:26).

Not only did Comte have a highly negative view of people and their innate propensity to egoism, but he also had a very limited view of the creative capacities of individuals. “We are powerless to create: all that we can do in bettering our condition is to modify an order in which we can produce no radical change” (Comte, 1851/1957:30). Thus, Comte’s actors are not only egoistic but also weak and powerless. In a very real sense, people do not create the social world; rather, the social world creates people, at least those animated by the nobler altruistic motives.
Comte addressed this issue in another way, in terms of the relationship between what he called the "subjective" and "objective" principles. The subjective principle involves "the subordination of the intellect to the heart," whereas the objective principle entails "the immutable Necessity of the external world … actually existing without us" (Comte, 1851/1957:26–27). Given the preceding discussion, it should be clear why Comte argued that the subjective principle must be subordinated to the objective principle. The "heart" (especially its egoism), which dominates the intellect, must be subordinated to external societal constraints so that another aspect of the "heart," altruism, can emerge triumphant.

Comte had other, more specific things to say about the individual. For example, he distinguished among four basic categories of instincts—nutrition, sex, destruction and construction, and pride and vanity (Comte, 1854/1968:249–252). Clearly, all but the constructive instinct were in need of external control. Although Comte attributed other, more positive instincts to people (attachment to others, veneration of predecessors), it is the instincts in need of external control that defined, to a great degree, his thoughts on the larger society. He believed larger social structures such as the family and society were needed to restrain individual egoism and to help bring forth individual altruism.

**Collective Phenomena**

In spite of his clear ideas on the individual, Comte's sociology overtly begins at a more macro level, with the family, which Comte labeled the "fundamental institution." The family, not the individual, is the building block of Comte's sociology, as he explained, "As every system must be composed of elements of the same nature with itself, the scientific spirit forbids us to regard society as composed of individuals. The true social unit is certainly the family" (1830–42/1855:502). Comte clearly believed that individuals constitute a different "level" of analysis than families (and society), which are, after all, "nothing but our smallest society" (1852/1968:161). These "smaller societies" form the natural building blocks of the larger society. Methodologically, Comte argued that "a system can only be formed out of units similar to itself and differing only in magnitude" (153). Individuals constitute different (microscopic) units, and (macroscopic) society cannot be formed out of them. Families are similar, albeit smaller, macroscopic units, and therefore they can be the basis of the larger society. In fact, Comte traced a progression whereby out of families tribes emerge, and from tribes come nations. The family is the "true germ of the various characteristics of the social organism" (Comte, 1830–42/1855:502). The family not only is the building block of society but also serves to integrate the individual and society, because it is through the family that people learn to be social; the family is the "school" of society. Thus, it is the family that must play a crucial role in the control of egoistic impulses and the emergence of individual altruism. Furthermore, if we are ever to improve society significantly, a change in the family will be the fundamental basis of any such alteration. Because the family is such a pivotal institution, a change in it will have profound effects on both individuals and the larger society.

Although the family is the most basic and most pivotal institution, the most important institution to Comte is religion, "the universal basis of all society" (1852/1968:7). Doing a kind of structural-functional analysis, Comte identified two major functions of religion. First, it serves to regulate individual life, once again primarily by subduing egoism and elevating altruism. Second, it has the more macroscopic function of
fostering social relationships among people, thereby providing the basis for the emergence of large-scale social structures.

Another important social institution to Comte is language. Language is profoundly social; it is what allows people to interact with one another. Thus, language helps promote unity among people. It connects people not only with their contemporaries but also with their predecessors (we can read their ideas) and their successors (they can read our ideas). Language is also crucial to religion in that it permits the formation, transmission, and application of religious ideas.

Another element of society that serves to hold people together is the division of labor (a view very much like that of Durkheim; see Chapter 7). Social solidarity is enhanced in a system in which individuals are dependent upon others. Society should have a division of labor so that people can occupy the positions for which they qualify on the basis of their abilities and training. Conversely, society should not force people into positions for which they are either underqualified or overqualified (Durkheim called this the “forced division of labor”). Although Comte argued for the need for a division of labor, he was very concerned about the dangers of excessive specialization in work in general and in intellectual work in particular. He worried about the tendency in society toward overspecialization and argued that the government should intervene to emphasize the good of the whole.

The government, in Comte’s view, is based on force. Force can hold society together; however, if the use of force gets out of hand, the government will be more of a destructive than an integrative factor in society. To prevent this from occurring, the government needs to be regulated by a “broader and higher society…. This is the mission of true Religion” (Comte, 1852/1968:249). Comte clearly did not have a high regard for government, and he felt that religion was needed “to repress or to remedy the evils to which all governments are prone” (252).

**Social Dynamics**

Comte wrote other things about social statics, but he devoted more attention to social dynamics. He felt that less was known about social statics than about social dynamics. Furthermore, the topic of social dynamics was, in his opinion, more interesting and of far greater importance than social statics. However, one may question these contentions. How is it that Comte knew more about the history of the world than he did about the nature of his own society? Why is the past (and future) more interesting than the present? In response to these questions, and contrary to Comte, it can be clearly argued that we always know more about the present than the past (or certainly the future) and that the here and now is far more interesting and far more important than the past (or future). Nevertheless, it is on the basis of his beliefs on these issues that Comte abbreviated his discussion of social statics and moved on to the study of social dynamics.

The goal of Comte’s social dynamics is to study the laws of succession of social phenomena. Society is always changing, but the change is ordered and subject to social laws. There is an evolutionary process in which society is progressing in a steady fashion to its final harmonious destiny under the laws of positivism: “We are always becoming more intelligent, more active, and more loving” (Comte, 1853/1968:60). Alternatively,
Comte labeled *social dynamics* the “theory of the Natural Progress of Human Society” (1830–42/1855:515). Overall, Comte saw us evolving toward our “noblest dispositions,” toward the dominance of altruism over egoism. Comte also offered a somewhat more specific view of this future state toward which we are evolving:

The individual life, ruled by personal instincts; the domestic, by sympathetic instincts; and the social, by the special development of intellectual influences, prepare for the states of human existence which are to follow: and that which ensues is, first, personal morality, which subjects the preservation of the individual to a wise discipline; next, domestic morality, which subordinates selfishness to sympathy; and lastly, social morality, which directs all individual tendencies by enlightened reason, always having the general economy in view, so as to bring into concurrence all the faculties of human nature, according to their appropriate laws.

(Comte, 1830–42/1855:515)

In his view, society invariably follows this law of progressive development; only its speed from one time period or one society to another may vary.

Because invariant laws are controlling this process of change, there is relatively little that people can do to affect the overall direction of the process. Nevertheless, people can make a difference by acting “upon the intensity and secondary operation of phenomena, but without affecting their nature or their filiation” (Comte, 1830–42/1855:470). People can modify (e.g., speed up) only what is in accord with existing tendencies; that is, people are able to bring about only things that would have happened in any event. The fact that people can affect the development of society, if only marginally, led Comte to his ideas on changing society and his thoughts on the relationship between theory and practice. We say more about this issue later in this chapter. However, it should be pointed out here that the idea that people can have only a minimal impact did not prevent Comte from developing grandiose plans for the future, positivistic society.

Comte’s theory of the evolution of society is based on his theory of the evolution of the mind through the three stages described previously. He contended that he “tested” this law by means of all the major methods—observation, experiment, comparison, historical research—and found it “as fully demonstrated as any other law admitted into any other department of natural philosophy” (Comte, 1830–42/1855:522).

Having derived this social law theoretically (from the laws of human nature), he turned to a “study” of the history of the world to see whether the “data” supported his abstract theory. However, Comte’s use of the words *study* and *data* is misleading because his methods did not incorporate the criteria that we usually associate with a research study and the data derived from it. For one thing, if Comte’s findings contradicted the basic laws of human nature, he would have concluded that the research was wrong rather than question the theory (Mill, 1961:85). Comte did no systematic study of the history of the world (how could one systematically study such a vast body of material?), and he did not produce data about that history (he merely provided a series of broad generalizations about vast periods of history). In other words, Comte did not do a research study in the positivistic sense of the term. In fact, Comte acknowledged this by saying that all he was
offering was an abstract history; science was not yet ready for a concrete history of the world.

As he had in other areas of his work, Comte offered a dialectical sense of the history of the world. That is, he saw the roots of each succeeding stage in history in its prior stage or stages. In addition, each stage prepared the ground for the next stage or stages. In other words, each stage in history is dialectically related to past and future stages. A similar viewpoint was offered by Marx (see Chapter 6), who saw capitalism as being dialectically related to previous economic systems (e.g., feudalism) as well as to the future communist society. Although on this point, and on several others, Comte’s ideas resemble those of Marx, the reader should bear in mind that the differences between the two thinkers far exceed their similarities. This difference will be clearest when we discuss Comte’s conservative views about the future of the world, which are diametrically opposed to Marx’s radical communist society.

Never humble, Comte began his analysis of social dynamics by asserting, “My principle of social development … affords a perfect interpretation of the past of human society—at least in its principal phases” (1830–42/1855:541; italics added). Similarly, at the close of the historical discussion briefly outlined next, Comte concluded, “The laws originally deduced from an abstract examination of human nature have been demonstrated to be real laws, explaining the entire course of the destinies of the human race” (1853/1968:535; italics added).

History

Comte limited his study to Western Europe (and the “white race”) because it had evolved the most and because it was, in his view, the “elite” of humanity. We need not go into great detail here about his historical theory because it is of little lasting significance. Furthermore, because it is more central to Comte’s underlying theory, we focus on the changing nature of ideas rather than on more material transformations (e.g., Comte saw society as evolving from the warfare characteristic of the theological stage to industry, which was to dominate the positivist stage). Comte began with the theological stage, which he traced to antiquity. He divided the theological stage into three succeeding periods—fetishistic, polytheistic, and monotheistic. In the early fetishistic stage, people personify external objects (e.g., a tree), give them lives like their own, and then deify those objects. Much later, polytheism in Egypt, Greece, and Rome developed. Finally, Comte analyzed the rise of monotheism, especially Roman Catholicism, in the Middle Ages. Although all of these are part of the theological stage, Comte was careful to show that they also possess the germs of the positivism that was to emerge at a much later point in history.

Comte considered the fourteenth century a crucial turning point, as theology began a long period of enfeeblement and decline. More specifically, Catholicism was undermined and eventually replaced by Protestantism, which Comte viewed as nothing more than a growing protest against the old social order’s intellectual basis (theology). This, for Comte, represented the beginning of the negativity that he sought to counteract with his positivism, a negativity that did not begin to be systematized into a doctrine until the mid-seventeenth century. Protestantism laid the groundwork for this negativity by encouraging unlimited free inquiry. This change in ideas, the development of a negative philosophy, led to a corresponding negativity in the social world and to the social crisis that obsessed Comte. This negative doctrine was developed by French
thinkers such as Voltaire (1694–1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), whom Comte did not see as systematic thinkers; as a result, he believed they were incapable of producing coherent speculations. Nevertheless, these incoherent theories gained a following among the masses because they appeared at a time when theology was greatly weakened and positivism was not yet ready to take its place. Most generally, this entire period was the transitional period, the metaphysical stage, between theology and positivism.

Comte was writing during what he believed to be the close of the metaphysical stage: “We find ourselves therefore living at a period of confusion, without any general view of the past, or sound appreciation of the future, to enlighten us for the crisis prepared by the whole progress yet achieved” (Comte, 1830–42/1855:738–739). Negativity had far outstripped positivity, and there was, as yet, no available intellectual means to reorganize society. Everywhere Comte turned there was crisis—art was “adrift,” science was suffering from overspecialization, and philosophy had fallen into “nothingness.” Overall, Comte described the situation as “the philosophical anarchy of our time” (1830–42/1855:738). This philosophical anarchy prepared the way for social revolution, especially the French Revolution, which, although negative in many senses, was salutary in that it paved the way for the positivistic reorganization of society. As a social event it demonstrated “the powerlessness of critical principles to do anything but destroy” (Comte, 1830–42/1855:739).

Not only was France the site of the major political revolution, but it was to take the lead in the reorganization of Western Europe. It had the most advanced negative ideas and developments, and it had gone furthest in positive directions. In terms of the latter, its industrial activity was most “elevated,” its art was most advanced, it was “foremost” in science, and it was closer to the new, positive philosophy (and, of course, his eminence, Auguste Comte, lived there). Although Comte saw signs during this period of the development of positivism, he recognized that in the short run, metaphysics (and the metaphysical stage) had won out. He described the effort in France to develop a constitutional government as being based on metaphysical principles, and he felt that at a philosophical level Rousseau’s “retrograde” philosophy had won out. He felt that Rousseau sought to emulate older societies, in which people were freer and more natural, rather than provide a basis for modern society. This negative development held sway for half a century in France, but Comte also saw within it positive developments in industry, art, science, and philosophy.

Comte saw this period as dominated by a focus on the individual and the metaphysical notion of individual rights. Concern for the individual led only to disorder; in its place, Comte, as we have seen, urged a focus on collective phenomena like the family and society. In addition, a focus on individual rights furthered the tendency toward disorder and chaos; Comte sought a society based on what he viewed as the positive idea of duties rather than on individual rights. The idea of duties was seen as a positive notion both because it was more scientific (e.g., more “precise”) and because it had a “calming” influence on people’s egoism as well as on the rampant negativity of the day. Instead of focusing on their individual rights, people were urged to concentrate on their duties to the larger society. This emphasis on duties would enable society to control individual egoism and to better bring out the altruism innate in people. These new duties were to help form the basis of a new spiritual authority that would help regenerate society and morality. This new spiritual authority was, of course, positivism.
Theory and Practice

The previous section broadly outlined Comte’s theory of social dynamics. Yet Comte (like Marx) wanted to do more than theorize. He wanted his theoretical ideas to lead to practical social changes; he explicitly and self-consciously sought the “connection between theory and practice” (Comte, 1851/1968:46). To this end, Comte proposed two objectives for positivism. The first, covered in the preceding sections, is to generalize scientific conceptions—in other words, to advance the science of humanity. The second, covered in this section, is to systematize the art and practice of life (Comte, 1851/1957:3). Thus, positivism is both a scientific philosophy and a political practice; the two “can never be dissevered” (Comte, 1851/1968:1).

Who Will Support Positivism?

One of the first political questions addressed by Comte is: Which social groups are likely to support the new doctrine of positivism? Comte assumed that many philosophers would be ardent supporters of this new set of ideas, but philosophers are limited in terms of their ability to implement their ideas. What about the groups of people who are more actively engaged in the social world?

Comte excluded the upper classes because they were in the thrall of metaphysical theories, were too self-seeking, occupied positions too overly specialized to understand the total situation, were too aristocratic, were absorbed in fighting over remnants of the old system, and were blinded by their educational experiences. Comte also did not expect too much help from the middle classes because they were too busily involved in trying to move into the upper classes.

Comte did expect help from three groups: in addition to the philosophers, who would supply the intellect, the working class would bring the needed action, and women would provide the required feeling. The philosophers, especially those attracted to positivistic ideas, would be involved, but “it is among women, therefore, and among the working classes that the heartiest supporters of the new doctrine will be found” (Comte, 1851/1957:4). Both groups were generally excluded from government positions and thus would be more likely to see the need for political change. Furthermore, discrimination against them in the educational system was less likely to blind them to the need for such change. Comte also saw both women and the working class as possessing “strong social instincts” and “the largest stock of good sense and good feeling” (142).

The Working Class

In Comte’s view, the members of the working class are better able to think during the workday because their jobs are not as fully absorbing as those of people in the higher social classes. Presumably this means that the working class has more time and energy to reflect on the benefits of positivism than do the upper classes. The working class is superior not only intellectually, at least in the preceding sense, but also morally. “The life of the workman … is far more favourable to the development of the nobler instincts” (Comte 1851/1957:144–145). More specifically, Comte attributed a long series of traits to members of the working class, including more affectionate ties at home; the “highest and most genuine types of friendship”; “sincere and simple respect
for superiors”; experience with life’s miseries, which stimulates them to nobler sympathies; and a greater likelihood of engaging in “prompt and unostentatious self-sacrifice at the call of a great public necessity” (145–146).

Comte saw the spread of communism among the working classes in his day as evidence that the trend toward social revolution was focusing in on moral issues. But Comte reinterpreted communism as a moral rather than an economic movement so that it fit into his scheme. To Comte, communism was “a simple assertion of the paramount importance of Social Feeling” (1851/1957:169). Clearly, this is a very different meaning of the term communism than the one used by Marx (see Chapter 6) and by most other thinkers who have employed the term.

Comte considered positivism as the “only doctrine which can preserve Western Europe from some serious attempt to bring Communism into practical operation” (1851/1957:170). Comte offered a number of contrasts between positivism and communism. First, positivism focuses on moral responses rather than on political responses and economic issues. (Here Comte clearly recognized that communism, at least as it was being practiced in his time, was an economic and political, rather than a moral, system). Second, communism seeks to suppress individuality, whereas positivism seeks both individuality and cooperation among independent individuals. Third, communism seeks the elimination of the leaders of industry, whereas positivism sees them as essential. (Thus, while the leaders of industry cannot play a role in the positivist revolution, they do play, as we will see later, a central role, along with bankers, in Comte’s vision of the revamped positivist society.) Fourth, communism seeks to eliminate inheritance, whereas positivism sees inheritance as important because it provides for historical continuity from generation to generation. In spite of his rejection of communism, Comte saw it as important as another, largely negative, force providing the groundwork for the emergence of positivism.

Women

Comte’s interest in the working class as a revolutionary force is not unusual, but his attraction to women as such a group is. His major position was that women brought to politics the needed subordination of intellect to social feeling. And Comte came to believe that feeling was preeminent, far more important than intellect or action: feeling is “the predominating principle, the motive power of our being, the only basis on which the various parts of our natures can be brought into unity” (1851/1957:227). Women are “the best representatives of the fundamental principle on which Positivism rests, the victory of social over selfish affections” (Comte, 1851/1957:232). Nevertheless, in spite of his admiration for women, he clearly believed men were superior practically and intellectually. On the intellectual issue Comte contended, “Women’s minds no doubt are less capable than ours of generalizing very widely, or of carrying on long processes of deduction … less capable than men of abstract intellectual exertion” (1851/1957:250). Because of their intellectual and practical superiority, it is men who are to take command in the actual implementation of positivism.

On the one hand, Comte clearly admired the moral and affectual aspects of women, and as a result, he was willing to accord them a key revolutionary role. On the other hand, he felt that men excelled in intellect and action, and he tended to demean the intellectual and active capacities of women. In terms of implementing
their role in the positivist revolution, women were supposed to alter the educational process within the family and to form “salons” to disseminate positivistic ideas. In spite of his veneration of women, Comte did not believe in equality: “Equality in the position of the two sexes is contrary to their nature” (1851/1957:275). He defended this view on the basis of the fact that positivism had discovered the following “axiom”: “Man should provide for Woman” (Comte, 1851/1957:276). More practically, positivism would institute a new doctrine: “Worship of Woman, publicly and privately” (283).

**Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions**

Comte’s focus on women, and his emphasis on their capacity for feeling, represented a general change in perspective from his earlier positions. As we have seen, Comte emphasized order in social statics and progress in social dynamics. To order and progress he now added the importance of feeling (love), which he associated with women. As a result he came to proclaim the “positivist motto, Love, Order, Progress” (Comte, 1851/1957:7). Positivism was no longer important just intellectually but morally as well. Similarly, Comte added the emotional element to his previous commitment to thought and action by arguing that positive philosophy represented a comprehensive perspective encompassing “Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions” (8).

Comte went further than simply according feeling equal status with thought and action; he gave feeling the preeminent place in his system. Feeling was to direct the intellect as well as practical activity. In particular, Comte argued that “individual happiness and public welfare are far more dependent upon the heart than upon the intellect” (1851/1957:15). It is this kind of viewpoint that led the champion of positivist intellectual life to the anti-intellectualism that is one of the problems we discuss later in this chapter.

The emphasis on feeling and love led Comte in his later work to add the science of morality (the study of sentiment) to his list of sciences. “Morals is the most eminent of the Sciences” (Comte, 1853/1968:41). Morality was a science, which in his system exceeded even sociology. “The field of Morals is at once more special, more complex, and more noble than that of Sociology” (40; italics in original). Not only was morality the most important science, but it was also crucial in giving direction to political changes. In Comte’s terms, morality is “the ultimate object of all Philosophy, and the starting point of all Polity” (1851/1957:101). In other words, morality lies at the center of the relationship between theory and practice. Comte saw a natural morality in the world, and it is the task of the positivist to discover its laws. These underlying laws of morality guide our intellectual thoughts and our political actions. Comte concluded, “It is henceforth a fundamental doctrine of Positivism, a doctrine of as great political as philosophical importance, that the Heart preponderates over the Intellect” (18).

Having added morality to the list of his major concerns, Comte returned to his law of the three stages to look at each stage from the point of view of thoughts, feelings, and actions. He saw the theological stage as being dominated by feeling and imagination, with only slight restraint from reason. Theology operated on a purely subjective level, with the result that it was out of touch with the objectivity of practice in the real world. “Theology asserted all phenomena to be under the dominion of Wills more or less arbitrary,” but in the real world people were, of course, led by “invariable laws” (Comte, 1851/1957:10). The transitional metaphysical stage continued to be dominated by feeling, was muddled in its thoughts, and was even less able to deal with
the practical world. However, positivism finally offered the unity and harmony of thought, feeling, and action. The ideas of positivism are derived from the practical world and are certainly a monumental intellectual achievement. And positivism also came to comprehend the moral sphere. Only when positivism incorporates morality “can the claims of theology be finally set aside” (13). Among other things, morality (feeling) is important for giving direction to thought and action. For example, without the direction of morality, positivism is prone to be too specialized and to deal with “useless or insolvable questions” (21). Under the guidance of morality, positivism comes to focus on the broadest, most important, most pressing, and most solvable problems of the day.

With morality added to positivism, it is but a short step for Comte to declare positivism a religion: “Thus Positivism becomes, in the true sense of the word, a Religion; the only religion which is real and complete; destined therefore to replace all imperfect and provisional systems resting on the primitive basis of Theology” (1851/1957:365). And this means that Comte and his principal followers become priests of humanity, with far greater influence than any other previous priesthood. In fact, Comte, with customary humility, declared himself the “founder of the Religion of Humanity” (1853/1968:x). The object of worship in the new religion of positivism is not a god or gods but humanity, or what Comte later referred to as the “Great Being,” that is, “the whole constituted by the beings [including animals], past, future, and present, which co-operate willingly in perfecting the order of the world” (1854/1968:27). The Great Being lies at the base of the positivist religion: “The Positive Religion inspires all the servants of the Great Being with a sacred zeal to represent that Being as fully as possible” (Comte, 1852/1968:65).
Criticisms and Contributions

From the previous discussion of a few of Comte’s ideas about the future, the reader might conclude that Comte ought to be dismissed out of hand. In fact, it might even be asked again why a chapter on Comte is included in this book. Thus, we begin this concluding section with an overview of Comte’s most important contributions to sociology. Later we turn to the far more numerous weaknesses in Comte’s work—weaknesses that lead us to conclude that it is safe for the science of sociology to forget much of Comte’s work and get on with its own development, which has forged far ahead of Comte’s ideas.

Positive Contributions

First, of course, Comte was the first thinker to use the term sociology; he can be seen as the “founder” of sociology. Although it is certainly the case that thinkers throughout the course of human history have dealt with sociological issues, Comte was the first to make such a focus explicit and to give it a name.

Second, Comte defined sociology as a positivistic science. Although this is, as we will see later, a mixed blessing, the fact is that the majority of contemporary sociologists continue to see sociology as a positivistic science. They believe that there are invariant laws of the social world and that it is their task to discover those laws. Many search for such laws empirically, whereas others (e.g., J. Turner, 1985a) follow Comte’s model and go about the search for such laws theoretically. Much of contemporary empirical sociology, and a significant segment of sociological theory, continues to accept Comte’s positivistic model of sociology.

Third, Comte articulated three major methods for sociology—observation, experiment, and comparison (the comparative-historical method is sufficiently important to be distinguished as a fourth methodology)—which continue to be widely used in sociology. Although Comte’s work is badly dated in most respects, it is surprisingly contemporary in terms of its methodological pronouncements. For example, there has been a substantial resurgence of interest in historical studies in contemporary sociology (see, e.g., Mann, 1986; Wallerstein, 1989).

Fourth, Comte differentiated in sociology between social statics and social dynamics. This continues to be an important differentiation in sociology, but the concepts are now called social structure and social change. Sociologists continue to focus on society as it is presently constituted as well as on its changing nature.

Fifth, although again a mixed blessing, Comte defined sociology in macroscopic terms as the study of collective phenomena. This was to take clearer form in the work of Durkheim, who defined sociology as the study of social facts (see Chapter 7). More specifically, many of Comte’s ideas played a key role in the development of a major contemporary sociological theory—structural functionalism (see Chapter 2).

Sixth, Comte stated clearly his basic ideas about the domination of human nature, if left on its own, by egoism. Because his writing is clear about such basic views, the reader gets a sound understanding of where Comte’s thoughts on the larger structures of society come from. Basically, those larger structures are needed to control individual egoism and to permit the emergence of individual altruism.
Seventh, Comte offered a dialectical view of macro structures. He saw contemporary macro structures as being the product of past structures and as possessing the seeds of future structures. This view gave his work a strong sense of historical continuity. His dynamic, dialectical view of social structure is superior to positions taken by many later, even contemporary, theorists of social structure who have tended to adopt static, ahistorical perspectives.

Eighth, Comte was not content with simply developing abstract theory, but he was interested in integrating theory and practice. Although this ambition was marred by some of his ludicrous ideas for the future society, the integration of theory and practice remains a cherished objective among contemporary sociologists. In fact, there is a growing interest in what is now called applied sociology, and the American Sociological Association has a section on sociological practice.

Basic Weaknesses in Comte’s Theory

We can begin the discussion of Comte’s specific weaknesses with a quotation from one of his severest critics, Isaiah Berlin:

His grotesque pedantry, the unreadable dullness of his writing, his vanity, his eccentricity, his solemnity, the pathos of his private life, his insane dogmatism, his authoritarianism, his philosophical fallacies … [his] obstinate craving for unity and symmetry at the expense of experience … with his fanatically tidy world of human beings joyfully engaged in fulfilling their functions, each within his own rigorously defined province, in the rationally ordered, totally unalterable hierarchy of the perfect society.

(Berlin, 1954:4–5, 22)

One is hard-pressed to think of a more damning critique of any social theorist, yet much of it is warranted. The issue here is: Where and how did Comte go wrong in his social theorizing?

First, Comte’s theory was overly influenced by the trials and tribulations of his own life. For one thing, very much ignored in his lifetime, Comte became increasingly grandiose in his theoretical and practical ambitions. For another, his largely unfulfilled relationships with women, especially his beloved Clotilde, led him to a series of outrageous ideas about women and their role in society. This problem was amplified by a sexism that led him to accord feelings to women, while men were given intellectual capacities and political and economic power. Second, Comte seemed to fall increasingly out of touch with the real world. After *Positive Philosophy*, his theories were characterized by a spinning out of the internal logic of his own ideas. One reason is that despite his claims, Comte actually did no real empirical research. His idea of doing empirical research was to offer gross generalities about the historical stages and the evolution of the world. Comte’s looseness about data analysis is reflected in the following statement: “Verification of this theory may be found *more or less distinctly* in every period of history” (1851/1957:240; italics added). Had Comte been a better data analyst, and had he been more generally in touch with the historical and contemporary worlds, his theories might not have become so outrageous.
Third, Comte also grew progressively out of touch with the intellectual work of his time. Indeed, he is famous for practicing cerebral hygiene rather early in his life. He systematically avoided reading newspapers, periodicals, and books (except for a few favorite poems) and thereby sought to keep the ideas of others from interfering with his own theorizing. In effect, Comte was increasingly anti-intellectual. This ultimately became manifest in his substantive work, in which he urged such things as the abolition of the university and the withdrawal of economic support for science and scientific societies. It is also manifest in his positivist reading list of one hundred books. Presumably, this limited list meant that all other books did not need to be read and could be safely burned. Comte’s anti-intellectualism is also found in other aspects of his substantive work. For example, in making the case that strong affect helps lead to important scientific findings, Comte downgrades the importance of rigorous scientific work: “Doubtless, the method of pure science leads up to it also; but only by a long and toilsome process, which exhausts the power of thought, and leaves little energy for following out the new results to which this great principle gives rise” (1851/1957:243). The clear lesson of Comte’s errors is that a theorist must remain in touch with both the empirical and the intellectual worlds.

Fourth, he failed as a positivist, both in his empirical and in his theoretical work. As to his empirical work, we have seen that he did woefully little of it and that the work he did was really little more than a series of gross generalizations about the course of world history. There was certainly little or no induction from data derived from the real world. Fifth, although Comte is credited with creating sociology, there is very little actual sociology in his work. His sketchy overviews of vast sweeps of history hardly qualify as historical sociology. His admittedly weak statements on a few elements of social statics contributed little or nothing to our understanding of social structure. Thus, little, if any, of Comte’s substantive sociology survives to this day. John Stuart Mill was quite right when he argued, “Comte has not, in our opinion, created sociology … he has, for the first time, made the creation possible” (1961:123–124). Comte’s lasting legacy is that he created some domains—sociology, positivist sociology, social statics, social dynamics—which his successors have filled in with some genuine substantive sociology.

Sixth, it can be argued that Comte really made no original contributions.5 Mill clearly minimized Comte’s contribution in this domain: “The philosophy called Positive is not a recent invention of M. Comte, but a simple adherence to the traditions of all the great scientific minds whose discoveries have made the human race what it is” (1961:8–9; see also Heilbron, 1990). Mill also argued that Comte was well aware of his lack of originality: “M. Comte claims no originality for his conception of human knowledge” (1961:6). Comte readily acknowledged his debt to such renowned positivists as Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo. A similar point could be made about Comte’s contribution to sociology. Comte clearly recognized important forerunners in sociology, such as Charles de Montesquieu (1689–1755) and Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). He may have invented the term sociology, but he certainly did not create the practice of sociology.

Seventh, whatever sociology Comte did have to offer was distorted by a primitive organicism (D. Levine, 1995a), in which he saw strong similarities between the workings of the human and the social body. For example, Comte argued that composite groups such as social classes and cities are “the counterpart of animal tissues and organs in the organisation of the Great Being” (1852/1968:153). Later, he contended that the family is the social counterpart of cells in an organism. Furthermore, Comte saw an analogy between social
disorder and disease in organisms. Just as medicine deals with physical diseases, it “is left for Positivism to put an end to this long disease [social anarchy]” (Comte, 1852/1968:375). This kind of organicism has long been eliminated from sociology.

Eighth, Comte tended to develop theoretical ways of thinking and theoretical tools that he then imposed on whatever issue he happened to be analyzing. For example, Comte seemed to be fond of things that came in threes, and many of his theoretical ideas had three components. In terms of theoretical tools, he was not content to apply his law of the three stages to social history; he also applied it to the history of sciences, the history of the mind, and the development of individuals from infancy through adulthood. A particularly bizarre example of this tendency to apply the law of the three stages to anything and everything is Comte’s application of it to his own mental illness:

I will confine myself to recording here the valuable phenomena I was able to observe in the case of my own cerebral malady in 1826…. The complete course … enabled me to verify twice over my then recently discovered Law of the Three Stages; for while I passed through those stages, first inversely, then directly, the order of their succession never varied.

During the three months in which the medical treatment aggravated my malady, I descended gradually from positivism to fetishism, halting first at monotheism, and then longer at polytheism. In the following five months … I reascended slowly from fetishism to polytheism, and from that to monotheism, whence I speedily returned to my previous positivism … thus furnishing me with a decisive confirmation of my fundamental Law of the Three Stages.

(Comte, 1853/1968:62–63)

Ninth, Comte’s “outrageous,” “colossal” self-conceit (Mill, 1961) led him to make a series of ridiculous blunders. On the one hand, his never powerful theoretical system grew progressively weak as he increasingly subordinated the intellect to feeling. One manifestation of this is his unrealistic and highly romanticized view of the working class and women as agents of the positivist revolution. This decline in intellect is also manifest in his practice of cerebral hygiene as well as in his limiting of the number of positive books. On the other hand, and more important, his oversized ego led him to suggest a series of social changes, many of which, as we have seen, are ludicrous.

Tenth, Comte seemed to sacrifice much of what he stood for in his later turn toward positivist religion. In the framing of this religion, Comte seemed to be most influenced by the structure of Catholicism. In fact, T. H. Huxley called Comte’s system “Catholicism minus Christianity” (cited in Standley, 1981:103). Comte acknowledged his debt to Catholicism when he argued that positivism is “more coherent, as well as more progressive, than the noble but premature attempt of medieval Catholicism” (1851/1957:3). His positivist religion mirrored Catholicism with its priests, vicars, and even its pontiff. Clearly, positivist religion has had no lasting impact, and it certainly served to subvert Comte’s scientific pretensions.
Summary

This is not an unbiased presentation of Comte’s ideas. It is clear that contemporary sociology has moved far beyond Comtian theory, and this chapter underscores that point. Although there are a number of useful derivatives from Comte’s theory, the main point is that there are innumerable weaknesses in that theory. This chapter is concerned with the limited number of positive derivatives from Comte’s theories and, more important, the negative lessons that can be of utility to the modern sociologist.

On the positive side, Comte’s work offers us a positivist perspective, and many contemporary sociologists continue to accept the idea of the search for invariant social laws. Comte has also given us the term sociology, and his focus within that field on social statics and social dynamics remains a viable distinction. His basic methods of social research—observation, experimentation, comparison, and historical research—remain major methods of social research. Within his work on social statics, he made a number of contributions (a focus on structures, functions, equilibrium) that were important in the development of the contemporary theory of structural functionalism. Also within social statics, it is to Comte’s credit that he laid out a detailed view of human nature on which he then erected his macrosociological theory. At the macro level, Comte offers a dialectical sense of structural relations, and his social realism anticipates that of Durkheim and many other later theorists. His work on social dynamics was relevant to later evolutionary theorists. Finally, Comte was not content simply to speculate, but he was interested in linking theory and practice.

Although these are important accomplishments, there are far more things to be critical of in Comte’s work. He allowed his theoretical work to be distorted by his personal experiences. He lost touch with both social and intellectual worlds. His empirical and theoretical work was lacking, given his own positivistic standard. There is really little substantive sociology in his work, and that which he offers is distorted by a primitive organicism. There is little in his work that was new at the time. Comte tended to impose his theoretical schemes on anything and everything, no matter how good the fit. His oversized ego led him to a number of outrageous theoretical blunders as well as many ludicrous suggestions for reforming the social world.
Notes

1. In his later work, Comte added a seventh science that ranked above sociology—morals. We say more about this later.

2. Comte came to associate the history of the world with these life stages—infancy (theological), adolescence (metaphysical), and maturity (positivist).

3. It is the kind of viewpoint that leads us, once again, to think of Comte as a social realist; there is a real world out there.

4. Or what Comte called the “division of employments.”

5. Heilbron (1990:155) disagreed, arguing that Comte's original contribution lies in his “historical and differential theory of science.” (This theory is discussed early in this chapter.)
5 Herbert Spencer
In the theoretical ideas of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) we see a considerable advance over those of Auguste Comte. Not only was Spencer’s work important in the development of sociological theory, but many of his theoretical ideas stand up well from the vantage point of contemporary sociological theory. In spite of this, Jonathan Turner (1985b; see also Francis, 2007, 2011), who has agreed with many of Spencer’s ideas, pointed out that modern sociological theorists have been disinclined to take Spencer seriously, relegating him, like Comte, to the “dustbin” of history. (Actually, in superheated terms, Turner argued that contemporary social theorists have been inclined to “spit on the grave of Spencer” [1985b:71].) This negativity is, to a large extent, traceable to Spencer’s highly conservative libertarian (not liberal) politics and to his belief in a sociological version of survival of the fittest. Although we do not fully share Turner’s enthusiasm for Spencer, there is much of merit in Spencer’s work. We demonstrate that a number of Spencer’s theoretical ideas continue to be important and relevant to sociological theory. However, there are also serious problems with Spencer’s theory that lead to the conclusion that although it represents an advance over Comtian theory, it is not quite up to the standard of the other major early theorists—Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel—to be discussed in the ensuing four chapters.
Spencer and Comte

A useful starting point for this discussion is the relationship between Spencer’s ideas and those of Auguste Comte. Although the lives of Spencer and Comte overlapped, the two men were separated by the English Channel (Spencer was British, and Comte was French), and there was a substantial difference in their ages (Comte was twenty-two years old when Spencer was born, and Spencer lived for forty-six years after Comte’s death and into the twentieth century). Thus, Comte had completed most of his work before Spencer published his first book, *Social Statics*, in 1850. However, almost as soon as Spencer had published *Social Statics*, comparisons were made between his theories and those of Comte. A number of seeming similarities exist between the works of the two men, but Spencer most often felt the need to distinguish his theories from those of Comte.

Spencer commented on Comte’s work in various places and even felt compelled to write an essay titled “Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte” (1864/1883/1968). Spencer began with great, if only obligatory, praise for Comte’s work: “In working out this conception [of positivism] he has shown remarkable breadth of view, great originality, immense fertility of thought, unusual powers of generalization” (1864/1883/1968:118). In spite of such an encomium, Spencer was concerned mainly with positioning himself as one of Comte’s “antagonists” and with distinguishing his own ideas from those of Comte because their work was “so utterly different in nature” (Spencer, 1904a:414).

Spencer did acknowledge his terminological debt to Comte by admitting, “I also adopt his word, Sociology” (1864/1883/1968:130). Both derived the terms *structure* and *function* largely from biology, and they tended to use them in similar ways. In utilizing these terms and the perspective they imply, both Spencer and Comte played key historic roles in the development of structural functionalism. However, regarding another set of terms, *social statics* and *social dynamics*, there are important differences between the ways in which the two men employed them. Although Spencer used these terms, he denied that they were drawn from or resembled Comte’s identical terms. In his autobiography, Spencer contended that when *Social Statics* (1850/1954) was published, he “knew nothing more of Auguste Comte, than that he was a French philosopher” (1904a:414). For Comte, these terms referred to all types of societies, whereas Spencer related them specifically to his future ideal society. Spencer defined *social statics* as dealing with “the equilibrium of a perfect society” and *social dynamics* as relating to “the forces by which society is advanced toward perfection” (1850/1954:367). Thus, in Spencer’s work the terms *social statics* and *social dynamics* are normative, and in Comte’s work they are descriptive.

Spencer classified himself, like Comte, as a positivist interested in the discovery of the invariant laws of the social world, but he hastened to add that positivism was not invented by Comte. Although Spencer saw himself as a positivist, he did not accept Comte’s version of positivism, especially Comte’s sense of a positivist religion. Spencer, like Comte, dealt with a wide range of sciences, but unlike Comte, he argued that “the sciences cannot be rightly placed in any linear order whatever” (1883:185). Rather, Spencer viewed the sciences as being interconnected and interdependent. Another major distinction made by Spencer is between Comte’s subjectivity (his concern with ideas) and Spencer’s objectivity (his concern with things):
What is Comte's professed aim? To give a coherent account of the progress of human conceptions. What is my aim? To give a coherent account of the progress of the external world. Comte proposes to describe the necessary, and the actual, filiation of ideas. I propose to describe the necessary, and actual, filiation of things. Comte professes to interpret the genesis of our knowledge of nature. My aim is to interpret, as far as it is possible, the genesis of the phenomena which constitute nature. The one end is subjective, the other is objective.

(Spencer, 1904b:570)
Herbert Spencer: A Biographical Sketch

Herbert Spencer was born in Derby, England, on April 27, 1820. He was not schooled in the arts and humanities, but rather in technical and utilitarian matters. In 1837 he began work as a civil engineer for a railway, an occupation he held until 1846. During this period, Spencer continued to study on his own and began to publish scientific and political works (Francis, 2011; Haines, 2005).

In 1848 Spencer was appointed an editor of The Economist, and his intellectual ideas began to solidify. By 1850, he had completed his first major work, Social Statics. During the writing of this work, Spencer first began to experience insomnia, and over the years his mental and physical problems mounted. He was to suffer a series of nervous breakdowns throughout the rest of his life.

In 1853 Spencer received an inheritance that allowed him to quit his job and live for the rest of his life as a gentleman scholar. He never earned a university degree or held an academic position. As he grew more isolated, and physical and mental illness mounted, Spencer’s productivity as a scholar increased. Eventually, Spencer began to achieve not only fame within England but also an international reputation. As Richard Hofstadter put it, “In the three decades after the Civil War it was impossible to be active in any field of intellectual work without mastering Spencer” (1959:33). Among his supporters was the important industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who wrote the following to Spencer during the latter’s fatal illness of 1903:

Dear Master Teacher … you come to me every day in thought, and the everlasting “why” intrudes—Why lies he? Why must he go? … The world jogs on unconscious of its greatest mind…. But it will wake some day to its teachings and decree Spencer’s place is with the greatest.

(Carnegie, cited in Peel, 1971:2)

But that was not to be Spencer’s fate.
One of Spencer’s most interesting characteristics, one that was ultimately to be the cause of his intellectual undoing, was his unwillingness to read the work of other people. In this, he resembled another early giant of sociology, Auguste Comte, who practiced “cerebral hygiene.” Of the need to read the works of others, Spencer said: “All my life I have been a thinker and not a reader, being able to say with Hobbes that ‘if I had read as much as other men I would have known as little’” (quoted in Wiltshire, 1978:67). A friend asked Spencer’s opinion of a book, and “his reply was that on looking into the book he saw that its fundamental assumption was erroneous, and therefore did not care to read it” (Wiltshire, 1978:67). One author wrote of Spencer’s “incomprehensible way of absorbing knowledge through the powers of his skin … he never seemed to read books” (67).

If he didn’t read the work of other scholars, where, then, did Spencer’s ideas and insights come from? According to Spencer, they emerged involuntarily and intuitively from his mind. He said that his ideas emerged “little by little, in unobtrusive ways, without conscious intention or appreciable effort” (Wiltshire, 1978:66). Such intuition was deemed by Spencer to be far more effective than careful study and thought: “A solution reached in the way described is more likely to be true than one reached in the pursuance of a determined effort [which] causes perversion of thought” (66).

Spencer suffered because of his unwillingness to read seriously the works of other people. In fact, if he read other work, it was often only to find confirmation for his own independently created ideas. He ignored those ideas that did not agree with his. Thus, his contemporary, Charles Darwin, said of Spencer: “If he had trained himself to observe more, even at the expense of … some loss of thinking power, he would have been a wonderful man” (Wiltshire, 1978:70). Spencer’s disregard for the rules of scholarship led him to a series of outrageous ideas and unsubstantiated assertions about the evolution of the world. For these reasons, sociologists in the twentieth century came to reject Spencer’s work and to substitute for it careful scholarship and empirical research.

Spencer died on December 8, 1903.

Thus, although both Spencer and Comte were concerned with the evolution of the world, Comte was mainly interested in the evolution of ideas, whereas Spencer focused on structural (and functional) evolution.

Finally, there are powerful political differences between Spencer and Comte. As we saw in the previous chapter, Comte wanted to construct a society, even a world, dominated by a positivistic religion of humanity and led by the high priests of positivism. Spencer countered Comte’s faith that “the ‘Religion of Humanity’ will be the religion of the future,” declaring that it “is a belief countenanced neither by induction nor by deduction” (1873/1961:283). In addition, Spencer had little regard for centralized control, which he felt would do far more harm than good. Thus, Spencer’s ideal is a society in which the government is reduced to a minimum and individuals are allowed maximum freedom. We return to Spencer’s political ideas later in the chapter, but suffice it to say that they are radically different from Comte’s politics. Spencer mused about how “profoundly opposed” were Comte’s and his “avowed or implied ideals of human life and human progress” (1904a:414).

Comte believed that individuals could be taught morality, largely through the positivist religion, but Spencer ridiculed the idea that morality could be taught in any fashion and by any means. Spencer believed that moral ideas emerge from individual action. In arriving at this conclusion, Spencer used here, as he did in many other places in his work, a survival-of-the-fittest perspective. In this specific case, he thought, the requirements of an orderly life will force people to act on the basis of their higher moral sentiments and repress their lower sentiments; in other words, people will be rewarded for moral behavior and penalized for immoral behavior. To put it another way, moral actions are likely to survive, whereas immoral actions are not. Spencer concluded that this “natural selection” of moral actions “alone is national education” (1873/1961:340).

In sum, although Spencer and Comte shared concerns with sociology, structures and functions, social statics
and social dynamics, positivism, the relationships among the sciences, the evolution of the world, the future ideal society, and morality, there are profound differences in their views on most of these topics as well as in their overall theories. Given this relationship—or, more accurately, this lack of a strong relationship—we turn to a discussion of Spencer’s sociological theory.
General Theoretical Principles

Spencer’s thoughts on the social world are based on a series of general theoretical principles. He argued that in the early history of humankind, religious thinkers and scientists were unified in their efforts to analyze and understand the world (Spencer, 1902/1958). Gradually, the two began to separate, with religion coming to focus on the unknowable and science on that which can be known. However, this differentiation is far from complete, even in the modern era, so religion and science continue to overlap and to conflict. In fact, Spencer saw his own work as involving elements of science (intelligence) and religion (morals).

Spencer’s main concern was with the knowable world and was therefore much more scientific than it was religious. (This is another contrast to Comte, whose later work became far more religious than scientific.) Science could never know the ultimate nature of things, but it could strive for the highest possible degree of knowledge. Before we can understand Spencer’s thoughts on science, we first need to understand his philosophy, which Spencer saw as transcending the sciences in the search for the complete unification of knowledge, for “truths which unify concrete phenomena belonging to all divisions of Nature” (1902/1958:277). In this section we discuss Spencer’s “general philosophy,” in which he deals with “universal truths” for all the world, and later we analyze his “special philosophies” and the narrower, but still universal, truths of specific areas, especially those relating to the social world. In emphasizing the overarching character of philosophy, Spencer rejected the positivistic idea that the goal of science is the reduction of an array of complex laws to a simple law and accepted, instead, the goal of knowledge integrated from a range of specific scientific fields.

Spencer articulated a series of general truths about the world, including the facts that matter is indestructible, that there is continuity of motion and persistence of force, that the relations among forces persist, and that matter and motion are continually redistributed. By a process of deduction from these general laws, Spencer articulated a series of ideas that constitute his general evolutionary theory.

Evolutionary Theory

Spencer believed that all inorganic, organic, and superorganic (societal) phenomena undergo evolution and devolution, or dissolution. That is, phenomena undergo a process of evolution whereby matter becomes integrated and motion tends to dissipate. Phenomena also undergo a process of devolution in which motion increases and matter moves toward disintegration. Having deduced these general principles of evolution and dissolution from his overarching principles, Spencer then turned to specific areas in order to show that his theory of evolution (and devolution) holds inductively, that is, that “all orders do exhibit a progressive integration of Matter and concomitant loss of Motion” (1902/1958:308).

The combination of induction and deduction led Spencer to his “final” evolutionary formula:

Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent, heterogeneity; and during
which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.

(Spencer, 1902/1958:394)

Let us decompose this general perspective and examine each of the major elements of Spencer’s evolutionary theory.

First, evolution involves progressive change from a less coherent to a more coherent form; in other words, it involves increasing integration. Second, accompanying increasing integration is the movement from homogeneity to more and more heterogeneity; in other words, evolution involves increasing differentiation. Third, there is a movement from confusion to order, from indeterminacy to determined order, “an increase in the distinctness with which these parts are marked off from one another” (Spencer, 1902/1958:361); in other words, evolution involves movement from the indefinite to the definite.

Thus, the three key elements of evolution are increasing integration, heterogeneity, and definiteness. More specifically, Spencer was concerned with these elements and his general theory of evolution as they apply to both structures and functions. At the most general level, Spencer associated structures with “matter” and saw them growing more integrated, heterogeneous, and definite. Functions are linked to “retained motion,” and they, too, are seen as growing increasingly integrated, heterogeneous, and definite. We will have occasion to deal with Spencer’s more concrete thoughts on the evolution of functions and structures in his work on society.

Having outlined his general theory of evolution, Spencer turned to the issue of the reasons for the occurrence of evolution. First, Spencer argued that homogeneous phenomena are inherently unstable: “the absolutely homogeneous must lose its equilibrium; and the relatively homogeneous must lapse into the relatively less homogeneous” (1902/1958:426). One reason for this instability is that the different parts of a homogeneous system are constantly subjected to different forces, which tend to differentiate them from one another. Changes in one part of the once homogeneous system will inevitably result in changes in other parts, leading, in turn, to greater multiformity. A second factor in sequence, but not in importance, is the multiplication of effects. In Spencer’s view, the multiplication of effects proceeds in a geometric manner. In other words, a small change in a once homogeneous system has increasingly ramifying effects. Thus, over time, the once homogeneous system grows increasingly heterogeneous. Third, Spencer discussed the effects of segregation on evolution. A sector becomes segregated from the others because of a likeness among its components, which are different from the components of other sectors. This segregation serves to maintain differences among the sectors, and this, in turn, furthers the multiplication of effects when one sector is exposed to and incorporates the distinguishing characteristics of other sectors.

Given that evolution is an inevitable process, the issue becomes: Where is evolution headed? While en route to their end state, phenomena move through a series of transitional states that can be described as “moving equilibria,” and the end state of the process is a new equilibrium. It could be argued that we are moving to “a state of quiescence,” and it could then be asked: “Are we not manifestly progressing toward omnipresent death” through the dissipation of moving forces (Spencer, 1902/1958:508)? Spencer responded negatively to
this question, arguing that we are moving toward universal life through new stages in the evolutionary process. He did, however, posit an end state of the evolutionary process: “Evolution can end only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness” (511). Spencer obviously had great faith in the evolutionary process, and its ultimate state of perfection gave him a standard by which he could assess all other steps in the evolutionary process.

In spite of his faith in evolution, Spencer recognized, in a dialectical fashion, that the process of dissolution complements the evolutionary process and periodically leads to its undoing. The dissolution process is likely to occur when evolution has ended and the evolved phenomenon has begun to decay.

Evolution constitutes the focus of Spencer’s work in a variety of realms, but our concern is with the evolution of human societies in terms of their growth and with the evolution of structures and functions. Following Spencer’s approach, we look at the evolution of society in general. Spencer’s rationale for devoting so much attention to the evolution of society (and its institutions) is his view that a fully adequate understanding of human social relations requires an understanding of their evolution (as well as their cycles and dissolution).
Sociology

Defining the Science of Sociology

Given Spencer’s focus on evolution, he defined “the study of Sociology as the study of Evolution in its most complex form” (1873/1961:350). To put it another way, sociology is “the natural history of societies” or, more specifically, “an order among those structural and functional changes which societies pass through” (63–64). However, Spencer did not restrict sociology to historical societies but also accepted the study of the ways in which contemporary organizations and institutions “are severally related to other phenomena of their respective times—the political institutions, the class-distinctions, the family arrangements, the modes of distribution and degrees of intercourse between localities, the amounts of knowledge, the religious beliefs, the morals, the sentiments, the customs, the ideas” (120). But although Spencer sanctioned the need for contemporaneous research, he felt that the true meaning of his work could be found only when it was placed in a historical, evolutionary context. However, whether sociological research focuses on historical or contemporary issues, it is clear that Spencer’s sociology concentrates largely on macro-level social phenomena (social aggregates)—societies, social structures, social institutions—as well as the functions of each.1

Spencer (1873/1961:115) shared with Comte the view that sociology should deal with social questions in the same scientific manner in which we address issues in the natural sciences. Furthermore, Spencer, like Comte, saw sociology, especially in its evolutionary concerns, as the most complex of sciences.

Although Spencer saw sociology as a (complex) science, he recognized that it is not an exact science, but he rhetorically wondered, how many sciences are exact sciences. To be a science, in Spencer’s view, a field of study need only consist of generalizations (laws) and interpretations based on those generalizations. Sociology seeks laws of social phenomena in the same way that the natural sciences seek the laws of natural phenomena. “Either society has laws or it has not. If it has not, there can be no order, no certainty, no system in its phenomena. If it has, then are they like the other laws of the universe—sure, inflexible, ever active, and having no exceptions?” (Spencer, 1850/1954:40). Although sociology and other sciences seek to make predictions about the future on the basis of laws, in most cases all sciences must be satisfied with only the most general predictions.

Legitimizing Sociology

In endeavoring to lay the groundwork for his kind of scientific sociology, Spencer confronted the problem that many other early sociologists faced—the need to legitimize the field. For example, he felt compelled to argue that laypeople lack the capacity to grasp the complex issues of concern to sociologists: one needs to be a trained sociologist in order to comprehend them. Because in their everyday lives they deal with the same issues that are of concern to sociologists, laypeople in Spencer’s day, and to this day as well, are convinced, erroneously, that they can do as good a job of social analysis as trained sociologists can. Spencer also confronted the misplaced confidence of laypeople in their views and their hostility to sociologists by arguing that the incapacity of the layperson “is accompanied by extreme confidence of judgment on sociological
questions, and a ridicule of those who, after long discipline, begin to perceive what there is to be understood, and how difficult is the right understanding of it” (1873/1961:115). As a result of these lay attitudes, Spencer saw many barriers to sociology’s receiving the recognition it deserves. These include the fact that few laypeople will be able to grasp the complexity of sociology’s subject matter, an unconsciousness on the part of laypeople that there are any such complex phenomena, the misplaced confidence of laypeople, and the fact that the minds of most laypeople are not adaptable and flexible enough to accept the new perspective offered by sociology.

Spencer felt that sociologists, in contrast to laypeople, require disciplined habits of thought and that those habits are to be derived from a careful study of other sciences. This need to study other sciences is buttressed by an argument similar to one made by Comte, that is, that the science of sociology encompasses the phenomena of concern in all other sciences. Spencer gave particular importance to the need for sociologists to be familiar with the fields of biology and psychology.

Sociology and Biology

Spencer saw three basic linkages between biology and sociology. First, he believed that all social actions are determined by the actions of individuals and that those actions conform to the basic laws of life in general. Thus, to understand social actions, the sociologist must know the basic laws of life, and it is biology that helps us comprehend those laws. Second, there are powerful analogies between sociology and biology. That is, society as a whole, like the living body, is characterized by, among other things, growth, structure, and function. Thus, an understanding of the biology of the living organism, which after all is far easier to study than the social organism, offers many keys to understanding society. Spencer concluded, “There can be no rational apprehension of the truths of Sociology until there has been reached a rational apprehension of the truths of Biology” (1873/1961:305). Third, a kind of natural progression and linkage exist between the two fields because humans are the “terminal” problem for biology and the starting point for sociology.

A more specific similarity between biology and sociology is the operation of the survival-of-the-fittest process in both living and social organisms. Spencer felt that survival of the fittest occurs in both the biological and the social realms and that the lessons of biology from the natural world are that there should be no interference with this process in the social world.

Sociology and Psychology

Spencer also devoted considerable attention to psychology as another major base for sociology. He adopted the general position that “psychological truths underlie sociological truths” (Spencer, 1873/1961:348). As he saw it, psychology is the study of intelligence, feeling, and action. He believed that one of the great lessons of psychology is that feeling, not intelligence, is linked to action. This belief led Spencer to emphasize sentiments and to downgrade the importance of intelligence and cognition in his sociological analyses (see the preceding chapter, on Comte, for a similar view). Although people throughout history have been dominated by sentiments and desires, this was especially true in primitive societies. Primitive people were inherently impulsive, and because they were “not much habituated to associated life,” they were “habituated to that
uncontrolled following of immediate desires” (Spencer, 1908a:64). In contrast, people in the modern world, although still dominated by feelings, emotions, and desires, were better able to control them because they were more habituated to collective life. Thus, Spencer argued that primitive people were characterized by greater selfishness and that there was more altruism in the modern world. This general orientation led Spencer to focus substantively on collective phenomena, and politically this emphasis on the importance of feelings is one of the factors that caused him to oppose conscious and intelligent change of society.

Although Spencer embedded his sociology in a set of assumptions about the psychological characteristics of individuals, he did not accept the idea that these characteristics are fixed. Rather, he believed psychological characteristics change with the changes in society as well as with those in the larger environment.

From his study of psychology, and more generally from his basic philosophical orientation, Spencer came to the “methodological individualist” conclusion that the units of society are individuals and that individuals are the source of social phenomena. Everything in society is derived from the motives of individuals, the combined similar motives of many individuals, or the conflict between those with one set of motives and others with another set. However, Spencer based his sociology on such psychological principles, but he did not spend much time analyzing the ways in which these psychological phenomena lead to the development of society and its various institutions. Rather, Spencer assumed that individuals are the units, and the base, of society and institutions, and then he proceeded to the macro level to study the evolution of society and its institutions. This lack of concern (with a few exceptions; see the discussion of ceremonial institutions later in this chapter) for how macro-level phenomena (society and institutions) emerge from micro-level units (individuals and their motives) is a serious weakness in Spencer’s sociological theory.

Sociological Methods

Within the context of Spencer’s definition of sociology as a science, he addressed a range of methodological problems.

Difficulties Facing Sociology

Spencer attempted to show “how greatly the advance of Sociology is hindered by the nature of its subject-matter” (1873/1961:66). He believed that sociology confronts several difficulties that differentiate it from natural sciences. To begin with, there are objective difficulties that involve the intrinsic nature of the facts that sociologists must analyze. For example, social phenomena are not directly perceptible. Unlike natural phenomena, they cannot be studied and measured with such instruments as clocks, thermometers, scales, and microscopes. (Of course, modern sociology has demonstrated that at least some social phenomena can be studied and measured with instruments [e.g., audiotapes and videotapes].) Another methodological difficulty for sociologists, in Spencer’s view, is that they, unlike psychologists, cannot utilize introspection as a method; social facts cannot be studied through introspection, but psychological facts can. (Again, at least some modern sociologists [e.g., phenomenologists] do use introspection as a method.)

The facts of concern to sociologists not only are different from those found in the natural sciences and psychology but also are far more complex and difficult to study. Sociologists inevitably deal with an enormous
range of highly dispersed details. It is often difficult to gain a sense of what is happening, because things occur over a wide geographic area and over long periods of time. Thus, for example, Spencer contended that the increasing division of labor at the time was very difficult to study and was under way for quite some time before its development was recognized.

Another objective difficulty facing sociology is the untrustworthiness of its data, derived from both past and present societies. For one thing, the data are often distorted by the subjective states of the witnesses to the events under study, but sociologists must rely on the reports of such witnesses for their data. For another, the sociological observer is often misled by superficial and trivial facts and fails to see what is truly important. Spencer offered a number of cautions to sociologists: “In every case we have to beware of the many modes in which evidence may be vitiated—have to estimate its worth when it has been discounted in various ways; and have to take care that our conclusions do not depend on any particular class of facts gathered from any particular place or time” (1873/1961:102). Spencer recognized that the objective difficulties are formidable, but he still believed that sociology can deal scientifically with general classes of facts, although not with specific facts.

Sociologists must also confront the reality that they are the human observers of humanly created phenomena. As human beings, sociologists use modes of observation and reasoning in their daily lives, and such habits may not be useful in, or may even be impediments to, sociological study. Sociologists must be wary of assessing others on the basis of their own standards. They are likely to experience difficulties in their own society, and those difficulties are greatly magnified when sociologists examine other societies.

Bias. Sociologists also have a very different relationship to the facts they observe than do natural scientists. Sociologists’ emotions may affect their judgments of social phenomena or lead them to make judgments without sufficient evidence. Spencer argued that “minds thus swayed by disproportionate hates and admirations, cannot frame those balanced conclusions respecting social phenomena which alone constitute Social Science” (1873/1961:144). In this context, Spencer dealt with a number of specific emotional biases such as those stemming from social class, politics, and religion.

Spencer’s Approach

In seeking to exclude these and other biases from sociological research, Spencer articulated a “value-free” position for the discipline (see Chapter 8, on Weber, for a more complex view of this issue). He argued, for example, that

in pursuing our sociological inquiries … we must, as much as possible, exclude whatever emotions the facts are calculated to excite … trustworthy interpretations of social arrangements imply an almost passionless consciousness. Though feeling cannot and ought not to be excluded from the mind when otherwise contemplating them, yet it ought to be excluded when contemplating them as natural phenomena to be understood in their causes and effects.

(Spencer, 1908b:230, 232)
In his own work, Spencer employed what has come to be called the *comparative-historical* method. That is, he engaged mainly in the comparative study of the different stages of societies over time as well as of various kinds of contemporary societies. His goal in this research was always to seek out, inductively, support (or, presumably, lack of support) for the theories derived deductively from his most general orientation. He was also interested in developing empirical generalizations based on his comparative, especially evolutionary, studies.

We must not close this section without mentioning the fifteen volumes of data on various societies (e.g., ancient Mexicans, ancient Romans) commissioned by Spencer but put together by others in accord with a category system developed by Spencer (J. Turner, 1985b:95–104). Although these volumes have been little read or used by sociologists, and although they are almost impossible to find today, they reflect Spencer’s commitment to empirical research of the comparative-historical variety in order to create a base whereby he and others could inductively support, or fail to support, theories derived deductively.
The Evolution of Society

Spencer employed his evolutionary theory in the writing of his massive three-volume work, *The Principles of Sociology* (1908a, 1908b, 1908c). (Much of this work had been published in serial form in magazines in the late 1800s.) In his more specific focus on the evolution of society and its major institutions, Spencer employed the three general dimensions outlined earlier—increasing integration (increasing size and coalescence of masses of people), heterogeneity, and definiteness (clearly demarcated social institutions). In addition, he employed a fourth dimension, the increasing coherence of social groups (modern civilized nations hold together far longer than early wandering groups of people). He offered the following statement as his general formula of social evolution: “There is progress toward greater size, coherence, multiformity and definiteness” (Spencer, 1908a:597).

Before we go any further, it is important to make clear that in spite of appearances, Spencer did *not* adopt an inevitable, unilinear view of social evolution. That is, evolution does not have to occur, and it does *not* always move in a single direction. Societies are constantly changing in light of changes in their environs, but these changes are not necessarily evolutionary. “Only now and then does the environing change initiate in the organism a new complication, and so produce a somewhat higher structure” (Spencer, 1908a:95–96). It is possible at any given moment for there to be no change, dissolution, or evolution. Not only is evolution not inevitable, but when it does occur, it does not take the form of a simple unilinear pattern; the stages do not necessarily occur in serial order (Haines, 1997).

Before discussing the actual evolution of society, we need a definition of society. Spencer made the distinction between nominalism (society is nothing more than its component parts) and realism (society is a distinct and separable entity), supporting realism because of the "permanence of the relations among component parts which constitutes the individuality of a whole" (1908a:447). “Thus we consistently regard society as an entity, because, though formed of discrete units, a certain concreteness in the aggregate of them is implied by the general persistence of the arrangements among them throughout the area occupied” (448). Thus, Spencer considered society a “thing” but unlike any other thing except for parallel principles in the way the component parts are arranged.

It should be pointed out here that there is an uncomfortable fit between Spencer’s social realism and his previously discussed methodological individualism. Methodological individualism generally leads to, and is more compatible with, a nominalist position on society. Conversely, methodological individualism generally rules out a realist orientation to society. Spencer’s work holds to both without telling us much about how he was able to adopt two such discordant perspectives or how they are linked to one another. In other words, how do individuals create a “real” society? Spencer’s explanation begins with assumptions about individuals, imposes the existence of society, and then ends (as we will see later) with a series of concerns about the negative impact of society on individuals.

Spencer saw societies as being like organic bodies (but unlike inorganic bodies) in that they are characterized by permanent relations among the component parts (D. Levine, 1995b). Spencer’s *organicism* led him to see a
number of parallelisms between society and organic entities. Among other similarities, both entities increase in size and are subject to structural and functional differentiation. Furthermore, both are characterized by an increasing division of labor, the development of interrelated differentiations that make still other differentiations possible. The component parts of both society and an organism are interconnected and in need of each other. In addition, if the whole of society or an organism dies, parts can live on; conversely, the whole can live on even if parts die (e.g., society continues even after individuals die).

One issue here is whether Spencer believed that society is an organism or that there are simply important analogies between the two. Although at times Spencer discussed society as an organism, his avowed position was that there are merely important parallels between the two and that one could improve one's understanding of society by better understanding the parallelisms.

In a more concrete sense, Spencer (1908b) saw society as a gathering of people forming a group in which there is cooperation to seek common ends. Cooperation in society implies some form of organization. In Spencer's view, there are two basic types of cooperation. The first is the division of labor, which is a spontaneously and unconsciously developed system that directly serves the interests of individuals and indirectly serves the interests of society. Here we have a situation in which individuals consciously pursue their private ends, and the unconsciously evolving organization is not coercive. The second cooperative system is the one for defense and government, that is, the political organization, which is a consciously and purposefully created system that directly serves the interests of society and indirectly those of the individual. The political system involves the conscious pursuit of public ends, and this consciously evolving organization is coercive in regard to individuals.

The first element in Spencer's work on the evolution of society is society's growth in size. In his view, societies, similar to living organisms, “begin as germs” (Spencer, 1908a:463). “Superorganic” (social) phenomena, like organisms, grow through both the multiplication of individuals and the union (“compounding”) of groups (e.g., tribes), both of which may go on simultaneously.

The increase in the size of society is accompanied by an increase in structure. Spencer defined a structure as “an organization” (1908c:3). Greater size requires more differentiation, a greater unlikeness of parts. In fact, Spencer argued that “to reach great size [society] must acquire great complexity” (1908a:471). More generally, he contended that “all social structures result from specializations of a relatively homogeneous mass” (Spencer, 1908c:181). The first differentiation is the emergence of one or more people claiming and/or exercising authority. This is followed soon after by the division between the regulative and the sustaining structures of society. We say more about these structures later, but at this early stage the regulative structure is associated with military activities, whereas economic activities that maintain the group are linked to the sustaining structures. At first, this differentiation is closely linked to the division of labor among the sexes, with men handling the regulative structure (the military) and women the sustaining structures. As society evolves, each of these structures undergoes further differentiation; for example, the regulative agency acquires a system of kings, local rulers, petty chiefs, and so on. Then there are differentiations of social classes as the military, the priestly, and the slave classes emerge. Further differentiations occur within each social class; in the priestly class, for example, sorcerers, priests, diviners, and exorcists develop. Overall, society moves toward increasing
structural differentiation and complexity.

The increasing differentiation of structures is accompanied by increasingly differentiated functions. A function is “the need subserved” by a structure (Spencer, 1908c:3). Spencer argued that “changes of structures cannot occur without changes of functions” (1908a:485). More generally, he contended that one cannot truly understand structures without a clear conception of their functions, or the needs served by the structures. In a relatively undifferentiated state, the various parts of society can perform each other’s functions. Thus, in a primitive society the male warriors could raise food and the females could fight if it became necessary. However, as society grows increasingly complex structurally, it is more and more difficult for highly specialized parts to perform each other’s functions. Evolution brings functional progress along with structural progress: “With advance of organization, every part, more limited in its office, performs its office [i.e., function] better; the means of exchanging benefits becomes greater; each aids all, and all aid each with increasing efficiency; and the total activity we call life, individual or national, augments” (Spencer, 1908a:489).

Having argued that societies evolve both structurally and functionally, Spencer returned to the sustaining and regulative systems mentioned previously and added a third, the distributing system. In the discussion of these three systems, Spencer made great use of analogies between social systems and organisms. In both social systems and organisms, the sustaining system is concerned with the internal matters needed to keep them alive. In the living body the sustaining system takes the form of the alimentary organs, whereas in the social system it adopts the form of the various elements of the industrial system. External matters for both social systems and organisms are handled by the regulative system. The regulative system takes the form of the neuromuscular system in organisms and the government-military apparatus in social systems. Both are concerned with warfare with other systems and conflicts with the environment. Finally, the distributive system links the sustaining and regulative organs and systems. Here Spencer saw an analogy between blood vessels (in organisms) and roads (in social systems), “channels which carry, in the one case blood-corpuscles and serum, and in the other case men and commodities” (1908a:510). In addition to describing each of these structures and the functions they perform, Spencer also demonstrated how each is undergoing a process of evolution.

Simple and Compounded Societies

On the basis of what he claimed are inductions from the evolution of past and present societies, Spencer developed two systems for classifying societies. The first, or primary, method is based on the increasing number of members of the aggregate as well as the degree to which that aggregate is compounded, or added to, by combining with other aggregates through such means as conquest or peaceful merger. Although, as we saw earlier, Spencer argued in general against a simple unilinear theory of evolution, the latter is just what he seemed to offer: “The stages of compounding and recompounding have to be passed through in succession. No tribe becomes a nation by simple growth; and no great society is formed by the direct union of the smallest societies” (1908a:555; italics added).

Spencer identified four types of societies on the basis of their degree of compounding. First, there are simple societies, which constitute single working entities that are not connected with any other entities. These are relatively homogeneous and uncivilized societies that have not gone through a compounding process. Second,
we find *compound* societies, in which there is some increase in heterogeneity. For example, in this type of society we may find the emergence of a supreme chief who rules over the chiefs of several simple groups. Obviously, because there are now several groups, some compounding has occurred either by conquest or by peaceful means. We also find in compound societies, as a result of increasing heterogeneity, an increase in the division of economic labor and in organization. Third, there are *doubly compound* societies, formed on the basis of the recompounding of compound groups. Here we find still more heterogeneity and further advances in civilization. Thus, in the political realm we find even more developed and stable governments. Spencer described many other advances in these societies, such as the development of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, a more complex division of economic labor, law emerging from custom, more towns and roads, and more advanced knowledge and arts. Finally, there are the *trebly compound* societies, or the great nations of the world, which are even more advanced in the areas just mentioned, as well as in many others. Included in this category are both older societies, like the Roman Empire, and modern nations.

**Militant and Industrial Societies**

Spencer offered a secondary system of classifying societies, although this one became better known than his primary system of classifying societies by their degree of compounding. This is his famous distinction between *militant* and *industrial* societies and the character of societies as they oscillate between the two. Militant societies tend to be dominated by the regulative system, whereas industrial societies are characterized by their more highly developed sustaining systems. These are ideal types, as Spencer recognized: “During social evolution there has habitually been a mingling of the two” (1908b:568). Spencer saw a long-term evolutionary trend from militant to industrial societies, although he was clear that this trend is not unilinear. Spencer also briefly mentioned the possibility of a future, “higher” type of society characterized by intellectual and aesthetic concerns (Perrin, 1976), but he had little to say of a substantive nature about the possibility of this third type of society.

Spencer went into much more detail about militant societies than about industrial societies, and what he said about them is much clearer, because militant societies had long been in existence, whereas industrial societies were still emerging in his day.

Militant societies are characterized by highly structured organizations for offensive and defensive warfare. In effect, the army and the nation are one: “The army is the nation mobilized while the nation is the quiescent army, and which, therefore, acquires a structure common to army and nation” (Spencer, 1908a:557). The militant society is dominated by its regulative system, with centralized and despotic government control, unlimited political control over personal conduct, and a rigidly controlled, disciplined, and regimented population. The cooperation that exists in society is a result of compulsion. The individual exists for the good of the collectivity: “Under the militant type the individual is owned by the state. While preservation of the society is the primary end, preservation of each member is a secondary end” (Spencer, 1908b:572). There is a rigid status hierarchy, and individual positions are fixed as to rank, occupation, and locality. Industry, such as it is, exists largely to fill the needs of the government-military.

Although he was critical of warfare, and he hoped for a future society in which warfare would be reduced or
eliminated, Spencer believed that war is useful in militant societies in producing social aggregation (by, e.g., military conquest). It is also useful in laying the groundwork for industrial society: “Without war large aggregates of men cannot be formed, and … without large aggregates of men there cannot be a developed industrial state” (Spencer, 1873/1961:176). This attitude toward warfare is also linked to Spencer’s views on survival of the fittest: “We must recognize the truth that the struggles for existence between societies have been instrumental to their evolution” (1908b:241). However, with the development of industrial society, war becomes more dysfunctional than functional, as it serves to block industrial growth, consumes needed people and materials, draws off intellectual resources, and fosters antisocial attitudes and behaviors in a society that values harmony.

As was his normal pattern, Spencer arrived at the characteristics of the militant society deductively and then demonstrated that they are supported by induction from actual militant societies. However, he was forced to deviate from his usual pattern in the case of industrial societies because their characteristics are not fully emergent and continue to be hidden by the militant characteristics of society. Therefore, in his depiction of industrial societies, Spencer was forced to rely even more heavily on the deductive method, although he did find some support in data derived from societies with industrial characteristics.

The industrial society is dominated by the sustaining system, and its industrial system is more developed and diverse. The regulative control that continues to exist tends to be negative (people shall not do certain things) rather than positive (people must do certain things). There is no need for despotic control, and the government tends to be democratic, with representatives of the people exercising power. The control that remains tends to be much more decentralized. There is voluntary cooperation among people, and the collectivity exists to serve the welfare of the people. Individuality is protected and permitted to flourish. The military system is subordinated to the needs of the industrial system. Control is exercised by contracts voluntarily entered into by individuals. Harmony, rather than conflict and warfare, characterizes industrial societies. Although militant societies are forced to be economically autonomous because of the hostility from and toward their neighbors, industrial societies are much more interdependent economically. Whereas militant societies tend to be rather inflexible, industrial societies are much more changeable and adaptable.
Darwin's On the Origin of Species: Historical Contexts

Even though Herbert Spencer coined the term *survival of the fittest*, naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) is most closely associated with evolutionary theory. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* is one of the most influential books not only in the history of science, but in Western history. In her "biography" of *On the Origin of Species*, Janet Browne (2006:2) described Darwin as one of the "makers of present times." He challenged the idea that humans are uniquely created by God and instead argued that humans had evolved from other species.

*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* was published in 1859. During Darwin's lifetime, the book went through an impressive six editions, sold 18,000 copies, and was translated into eleven languages (Browne, 2006:103). Despite its bold claims, the style of the book reflected Darwin's humble personality: "He appeared in his book just as he appeared in life: as a reputable scientific gentleman, courteous, trustworthy and friendly" (68). Like other great books of the era (Marx's *Capital*, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*), *On the Origin of Species* was novelistic in style and complexity. It addressed great human themes. The book was read by a wide audience that included not only scientists and scholars but "journalists, men of letters, merchants, businessmen, educators and ordinary men and women… Bishops, poets, kennel-hands and governesses read the book. Even Queen Victoria took an interest" (85).

As Browne (2006) pointed out, it also stirred controversy. Most notably it challenged the idea that humans are God’s unique and distinct creation. A public debate at the 1860 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science exemplifies the clash between science and religion. Darwin’s most committed ally, Thomas Henry Huxley (“Darwin’s bulldog”), and the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, faced off against each other. Browne (2006:96) describes Wilberforce’s attack:

How could anyone seriously believe that mankind had developed from oysters, he asked? At some point he turned to Huxley and facetiously enquired "was Huxley related to an ape on his grandfather’s or grandmother’s side.” [Huxley responded that he] "would rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather than…a man who introduced ridicule into a grave scientific discussion.”

Darwin’s book exemplified a modern way of thinking about the relationship between humans and nature. Humans were not created as part of a harmonious vision. Rather, they came into existence “little by little” through “struggle” (Browne, 2006:67). In this view “everything was linked by one and the same explanation” and “time, chance and reproduction rule[d] the earth” (67). No wonder the book was controversial. It stripped humanity of all ideological comforts and placed people on the same playing field as all other animals.

Yet, the book resonated with the spirit of the time. It inspired developments in the natural and social sciences (including many theories covered in this book). It also supplied ideas that supported some of the darkest developments of the modern era. For example, it was used to justify the eugenics movement, and racist theories of human difference (Browne, 2006).

Its various influences aside, the history of *On the Origin of Species* show how great books can enter into and shape the course of history.

Of course, these societies are ideal types that vary greatly from one setting to another. Spencer made clear the ideal–typical character of his depiction of a militant society: “Having contemplated the society ideally organized for war, we shall be prepared to recognize in real societies the characteristics which war has brought about” (1908b:569; italics added). Spencer detailed a number of factors that contribute to variation within each of these types, including racial composition, the nature of the immediately preceding society, the habitat, and surrounding societies. Spencer also discussed “hybrid societies,” which are only partially militant or industrial, although he contended that hybrid societies are likely to be more like militant societies than industrial societies. In fact, he described the society in which he lived as such a transitional hybrid—semi-militant and semi-industrial (Spencer, 1908c:551). Finally, although there is a general evolutionary trend toward industrial societies, Spencer recognized that regression to more militant societies is possible. For
example, an international conflict can cause an industrial society to grow more militant, engaging in more aggressive external acts and developing a more repressive internal government. Although Spencer saw a continual threat of rebarbarization, he hoped for some sort of federation of the nations of the world that would forbid wars among member nations. Thus, in his militant-industrial categorization system, Spencer did not offer a unilinear view of the evolution of society.
Ethics and Politics

In his earliest book, *Social Statics* (1850/1954), and in much later books, especially his two-volume *The Principles of Ethics* (1897/1978), Spencer articulated a rather consistent ethical and political position that informs, and is informed by, his substantive work. He subtitled *Social Statics* “The conditions essential to human happiness specified, and the first of them developed,” and he described *The Principles of Ethics* as a set of “rules of right conduct on a scientific basis” (Spencer, 1897/1978:xiv). We briefly examine in this section Spencer’s ethical and political ideas. A key issue is whether these ideas greatly enhanced or fatally injured his sociology.

Spencer’s moral and political ideas are derived, to a large extent, from his methodological individualism. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Spencer focused on macro-level phenomena, but he did so with the view that the basis for these phenomena was individual “units.” This specific view of the social world is deduced, like many others, from his general principles: “As a multitude is but an assemblage of units, and as the characteristics of a multitude result from the properties of its units, so social phenomena are consequences of the natures of individual men” (Spencer, 1902/1958:8). Or, more strongly, “The properties of the units determine the properties of the aggregate” (Spencer, 1873/1961:41).2 The characteristics of people in an associated state are derived from the inherent properties of individuals: “No phenomenon can be presented by a corporate body but what there is a preexisting capacity in its individual members for producing” (Spencer, 1850/1954:17). Just as macro-level phenomena are derived from individuals, so too is the moral law of society: “The right ruling of humanity in its state of multitude is to be found in humanity in its state of unitude” (18).

Spencer believed that individuals are endowed with a moral sense that dictates their actions and ultimately the structure and functioning of society.

Although individuals are the proximate cause of social morality, the more distant cause is God. The things that people come to view as moral are in line with divine rule. Spencer castigated those who “doubt the foresight and efficiency of the Divine arrangements” (Spencer, 1850/1954:47). He further argued that “human happiness is the divine will” (67). Thus, society is seen as evolving toward an increasing state of perfection and happiness.

Another factor in this evolution to a perfect moral state is that evil, in Spencer’s view, progressively disappears. To explain this disappearance, Spencer once again employed the survival-of-the-fittest argument.3 As he viewed it, evil is a result of nonadaptation to external conditions, or “unfitness to the conditions of existence.” However, such nonadaptation is constantly diminishing and must ultimately disappear. More generally, Spencer argued that “all excess and all deficiency must disappear; that is, all unfitness must disappear; that is, all imperfection must disappear.” As a result of the survival-of-the-fittest argument applied to evil, Spencer concluded that “the ultimate development of the ideal man is logically certain” (Spencer, 1850/1954:59).

Turning the argument around, Spencer contended that human happiness comes from the satisfaction of desires and that gratification can come only from an exercise of human faculties. Thus, people must be free to exercise their faculties; that is, they must have liberty. Spencer invoked God on the side of this viewpoint as
well: “God intends he [the human] should have that liberty. Therefore he has a right to that liberty” (1850/1954:69). He also embedded this argument in his methodological individualism by contending that people are endowed with “an instinct of personal rights” (86). Furthermore, this liberty must not be the right of just a few; because everyone has these faculties, all individuals have the right to exercise them freely.

However, there are limits on personal liberty, most important is the fact that an individual, in exercising his or her liberty, cannot be allowed to infringe on the liberty of others. However, because individuals are not endowed with the capacity to prevent their actions from infringing on the rights of others, society is needed to perform this function. This leads to Spencer's libertarian political position that there is a role for the state but it is a highly limited one. In his view, the state must protect the liberty of individuals, but “it ought to do nothing more than protect” (Spencer, 1850/1954:264–265). Because he saw this limited role for the state, Spencer rejected the label “laissez-faire theorist” that some affixed to him.

Of course, such a libertarian position fits well with Spencer’s views on evolution and survival of the fittest. Other than protecting individual liberty, the state is to get out of the way and allow the “law” and dynamics of evolution to work themselves out. Here is one of the ways in which Spencer described that law:

The well-being of existing humanity and the unfolding of it into this ultimate perfection are both secured by that same beneficent, though severe, discipline to which animate creation at large is subject: a discipline which is pitiless in the working out of good: a felicity-pursuing law which never swerves for the avoidance of partial and temporary suffering. The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shoulderings aside of the weak by the strong, which leaves so many “in shallows and in miseries,” are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence.

(Spencer, 1850/1954:288–289)

Thus, Spencer did not view such “harsh realities” as hunger and disease as evil; rather, they “are seen to be full of the highest beneficence—the same beneficence which brings to early graves the children of diseased parents and singles out the low-spirited, the intemperate, and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic” (Spencer, 1850/1954:289). Similarly, and more harshly, “Society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile slow, vacillating, faithless members” (289). To put it more directly, those who are not healthy, not smart, not steadfast, and not believers in the divine should, and will, for the benefit of the larger society, die, as long as the natural process of evolution is left to operate in accord with its basic laws. Spencer did not totally deny that some of the disadvantaged may need care, but they should be taken care of through what he called, “positive private beneficence” (Offer, 1999).

Thus, we return to Spencer’s libertarian politics. The state, as well as private philanthropists, is enjoined from preventing misery because to do so would cause greater misery for future generations. That is, if the unfit are allowed to survive, they will produce only similarly unfit offspring and that will only increase the magnitude of the problem for societies of the future. Those individuals, both in and out of the government, who think of themselves as doing good are in fact doing great harm to society. Interference by the state (and other agencies)
serves only to encourage the multiplication of the unfit, to discourage the multiplication of the fit, and to stop
the “purifying” process of natural evolution. Those who interfere “bequeath to posterity a continually
increasing curse” (Spencer, 1850/1954:290).

Specifically, Spencer opposed state-administered charity (or any charity, for that matter) and state-run
education. He even opposed government involvement in sanitation matters, such as garbage removal.
Throughout his work, Spencer often returned to the theme of the evils of state intervention. In the end, the
government is to refrain from intervention not only because such interference hampers the natural process of
evolution but also because it curtails individual rights: “For a government to take from a citizen more property
than is needful for the efficient defense of that citizen’s rights is to infringe his rights” (Spencer,
1850/1954:333). What Spencer sought was a “society organized upon the same [evolutionary] system as an
individual being” (403).

In his autobiography, Spencer railed against the distortion of his libertarian position (“genuine liberalism”) by
the “modern perversion of it which, while giving them nominal liberties in the shape of votes … is busily
decreasing their liberties, both by the multiplication of restraints and commands, and by taking away larger
parts of their incomes to be spent not as they individually like, but as public officials like” (1904a:487–488).
Elsewhere, Spencer described the contrast in this way: “Liberalism habitually stood for individual freedom
versus State-coercion” (1892/1965:5).

In response to the critics of his position, Spencer (1873/1961) expressed shock at being seen as an enemy of
the poor and other unfortunate members of society. He depicted himself as more humane than that. He
argued that he was not for inaction but rather for the use of “fit means” to deal with the problems of the
unfortunate. Of course, one wonders about the credibility of such a position in light of views such as his
care for “the diligent and provident labourer had to pay that the good-for-nothings might not suffer”
(Spencer, 1892/1965:113). Obviously, Spencer had little regard for those on the public dole and wished that
those who worked hard should not have to pay for the poor, with the result, presumably, that the poor would
be permitted to suffer and ultimately die.

Obviously, if Spencer was opposed to state intervention, he would certainly be opposed to any radical (e.g.,
socialist, communist) alteration of society. He believed that sociology, with its focus on the long history of
unintentional evolutionary changes, would help disabuse us of the notion that “social evils admit of radical
cures” (Spencer, 1873/1961:19). Societies arise by slow evolution, not by human manufacture and certainly
not by human demolition and remanufacture. Spencer’s fears about the controls exercised by the capitalist
state were nothing in comparison to his fears about socialistic control, which he equated with slavery and
tyranny. As a result of this view, Spencer associated socialism with militant societies and argued that it would
“cease to be normal as fast as the society becomes predominantly industrial in its type” (1908c:577).

Spencer differentiated his own ideal society from that of socialists and communists by arguing that he was not
in favor of giving people equal shares of things but rather of giving “each an opportunity of acquiring the
objects he desires” (Spencer, 1850/1954:118). Spencer saw socialism as standing in opposition to the
selfishness that he felt was an inherent part of human nature. It is unrealistic to expect that selfish people will
voluntarily surrender their excess productivity to others; selfish people cannot produce an unselfish system. Relatedly, as we saw earlier in this chapter, Spencer viewed people as being endowed with an “instinct for personal rights,” and one of those rights, which he saw as an element of human nature, is a desire for property. Therefore, socialism stands in opposition to this element of human nature and, as a result, cannot survive.

Spencer’s opposition to socialism and communism is also related to his opposition to any abrupt or revolutionary change. This follows from his oft-stated view that evolution is, and must be, a gradual process. Not only does abrupt change violate evolution, but it also leads to a radically altered society that would be out of harmony with human nature, which changes glacially.
Criticisms and Contemporary Applications

The moral and political views previously outlined, as well as many others, led many sociologists, as Jonathan Turner (1985b) argues, to dismiss Spencer’s theoretical perspective. That is, contemporary, often liberal or radical, sociological theorists tend to reject the kind of conservative morality and politics preached by Spencer. Their rejection of his morality and politics led to a rejection of his sociological theory. We agree with Turner that this is not a good reason to reject a theory. That is, one should not reject a theory merely because one opposes the morals or politics of its creator. However, there is another reason to question Spencer’s theory, and that is on the basis of the feeling that his scientific sociology is shaped and distorted by his moral and political views. From our perspective, there is a very suspicious fit between Spencer’s “scientific” sociology and his moral and political views. In fact, it could be argued that Spencer’s claim to being scientific is vitiated by the fact that his work is biased by his moral and political proclivities. (Of course, similar things could be said about Marx, Weber, Simmel, and many other classical theorists.) Spencer cautioned sociologists about being biased in their work, but it seems clear that Spencer’s sociological theory is weakened by his own biases. Thus it is not Spencer’s specific morality or politics that leads us to question his work but rather the fact that they biased and distorted his theory.

Spencer’s theories also are limited because the version of evolutionary theory that drives much of his work is outdated. Nevertheless, it is worth taking note of contemporary developments that carry forward Spencer’s important interest in evolution. According to Maryanski (Sanderson, 2007), there are two kinds of evolutionary perspectives in contemporary sociology. The first, like Spencer’s theory, focuses on the “study of long-term social evolution” (Sanderson, 2007). For example, Sanderson developed an approach called “evolutionary materialism” in which he details the “role of economic, demographic, technological and economic factors as the principle causes of social evolution” (Sanderson, 1995, 2007). Not unlike Spencer’s attempt to distinguish evolutionarily distinct kinds of society (e.g. militant and industrial), Sanderson (2007) distinguishes three great evolutionary changes in human history: “the Neolithic Revolution, the rise of civilization and the state, and the transition to modern capitalism.”

The second variety of sociological evolutionary theory was developed out of neo-Darwinian theories such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. This approach attempts to analyze the biological, especially genetic, foundations of social life (Sanderson, 2007). Sociobiology, made famous by biologist E. O. Wilson in the 1970s, explains human behavior “as an organism’s attempt to maximize its reproductive success” (Sanderson, 2007). One of the challenges for sociobiology was to demonstrate how evolution can favor co-operative and altruistic behaviors, especially among people who do not share “common genetic interests” (Machalek, 2007:292). Sociobiology was heavily criticized because it too readily reduced complex, mindful behavior to biologically determined causes. Evolutionary psychology emerged in response to these criticisms and “emphasize[d] that it is our minds that have evolved, not our disembodied behaviors” (Mazur, 2007). This approach shifts the focus from the study of genetic fitness to the study of the evolution of minds and the way minds influence behavior. Although evolutionary psychology addresses the critiques made against sociobiology, the focus on the mind still leaves it several steps removed from the macrosociological problems.
of central concern to sociology, and favored by Spencer during his lifetime. Sanderson (2007) notes, then, that one of the pressing theoretical challenges for evolutionary sociology is to develop a theory that brings together these “macro” and “micro” varieties of evolutionary thought.
Summary

Herbert Spencer’s theory is more powerful, and his work has more contemporary significance, than that of the other significant figure in the “prehistory” of sociological theory, Auguste Comte. Their theories have some similarities (e.g., positivism) but far more differences (e.g., Comte’s faith in a positivist religion and Spencer’s opposition to any centralized system of control).

Spencer offered a series of general principles from which he deduced an evolutionary theory: increasing integration, heterogeneity, and definiteness of both structures and functions. Indeed, sociology, in Spencer’s work, is the study of the evolution of societies. Although Spencer sought to legitimize sociology as a science, he also felt that sociology is linked to, and should draw upon, other sciences such as biology (especially the idea of survival of the fittest) and psychology (especially the importance of sentiments). In part from his concern with psychology, Spencer developed his methodological-individualist approach to the study of society.

Spencer addressed a number of the methodological difficulties confronting sociology as a science. He was especially concerned with various biases the sociologist must overcome—educational, patriotic, class, political, and theological. In seeking to exclude these biases, Spencer articulated a “value-free” position for sociology. In much of his substantive work, Spencer employed the comparative-historical method.

The evolution of society occupies a central place in Spencer’s sociology. In his analysis of societal evolution, Spencer employed the three general aspects of evolution mentioned previously—increasing integration (increasing size and coalescence of masses of people), heterogeneity, and definiteness (here, clearly demarcated institutions)—as well as a fourth aspect—the increasing coherence of social groups. In his evolutionary social theory, Spencer traced, among other things, the movement from simple to compounded societies and from militant to industrial societies.

Spencer also articulated a series of ethical and political ideals. Consistent with his methodological individualism, Spencer argued that people must be free to exercise their abilities; they must have liberty. The only role for the state is the protection of individual liberty. Such a laissez-faire political perspective fits well with Spencer’s ideas on evolution and survival of the fittest. Given his perspective on the gradual evolution of society, Spencer also rejected the idea of any radical solution (e.g., communism) to society’s problems.
Notes

1. In his work, though, Spencer offered some insightful micro accounts, especially of rituals in his discussion of ceremonies (see pp. 133–134).

2. Although we see here (and have seen elsewhere) that individual units lie at the base of aggregates, Spencer also recognized a dialectic in which changes in the aggregate in turn alter the units. Spencer specified a number of superorganic products that serve to modify the individual, including material “appliances” (e.g., the steam engine), language, knowledge, science, customs and laws, aesthetic products (literature), and so on.

3. By the way, Spencer (1897/1978) later made it clear that his ideas on evolution were not indebted to Charles Darwin, whose book *On the Origin of Species* appeared in 1859, almost a decade after Spencer had published *Social Statics*. However, in the preface to the fourth edition of *First Principles* (1902/1958), Spencer admitted to altering some of his ideas as a result of Darwin’s influence.
Chapter Outline

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The Dialectic
Dialectical Method
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Alienation
The Structures of Capitalist Society
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Cultural Aspects of Capitalist Society
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Introduction

Marx began his most famous work, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels 1848/1948), with the following line: “There is a spectre haunting Europe, the spectre of communism.” It might be said that the same ghost is haunting our understanding of Marx. It is difficult to separate the ideas of Marx from the political movements that they inspired. Nevertheless, as Tom Rockmore (2002:96) wrote, we must try “to free Marx from Marxism.”

For many, Marx has become more of an icon than a thinker deserving of serious study. The symbolism of his name tends to muddle understanding of his ideas. Marx is the only theorist discussed in this book who has had political movements and social systems named after him. He is probably the only theorist your friends and family have strong opinions about. He is often criticized, as well as praised, by people who have never actually read his work. Even among his followers, Marx’s ideas frequently are reduced to slogans such as “the opium of the people” and “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” but the role of these slogans in Marx’s encompassing theory often is ignored.

There are many reasons for this lack of understanding of Marx’s social theory, the main one being that Marx never really completed his social theory. He planned, early in his career, to publish separate works on economics, law, morals, politics, and so forth, and then “in a special work, to present them once again as a connected whole, to show the relationship between the parts” (Marx, 1932/1964:280). He never did this final work and never even completed his separate work on economics. Instead, much of his time was taken up by study, journalism, political activity, and a series of minor intellectual and political arguments with friends and adversaries.

In addition, although Marx could write clear and inspiring prose, especially in his political tracts, he often preferred a vocabulary that relied on complex philosophical traditions, and he made these terms even more difficult to understand by implicitly redefining them for his own use. Vilfredo Pareto made the classic critique of Marx by comparing his words to a fable about bats. When someone said they were birds, the bats would cry, “No, we are mice.” When someone said they were mice, they protested that they were birds. Whatever interpretation one makes of Marx, others can offer alternative interpretations. For example, some stress Marx’s early work on human potential and tend to discount his political economy (see, e.g., Ollman, 1976; Wallimann, 1981; Wartenberg, 1982). Others stress Marx’s later work on the economic structures of society and see that work as distinct from his early, largely philosophical work on human nature (see Althusser, 1969; Gandy, 1979; McMurty, 1978). One interpreter of Marx made the following comment, which applies equally to this chapter: “Virtually every paragraph in this chapter could be accompanied by three concise paragraphs describing why other readers of Marx, erudite and influential, think that this paragraph is wrong, in emphasis or substance” (R. Miller, 1991:105). And, of course, the differing interpretations have political consequences, making any disagreement extremely contentious.

Despite these problems, Marx’s theories have produced one of sociology’s most productive and significant research programs. When Marx died in 1883, the eleven mourners at his funeral seemed to believe what Engels
said in his eulogy: “His name and work will endure through the ages.” Nevertheless, Engels seems to have been right. His ideas have been so influential that even one of his critics admitted that, in a sense, “we are all Marxists now” (P. Singer, 1980:1). As Hannah Arendt (2002:274) wrote, if Marx seems to be forgotten, it is not “because Marx’s thought and the methods he introduced have been abandoned, but rather because they have become so axiomatic that their origin is no longer remembered.”

It is for these reasons that a return to Marx has proven so productive to those working in sociology. Thinking about Marx helps to clarify what sociology and, indeed, our society have taken for granted. Rediscoveries and reinterpretations of Marx have often renewed sociology and opened up a fresh perspective on such issues as alienation, globalization, and the environment (Foster, 2000).

Despite differing interpretations, there is general agreement that Marx’s main interest was in the historical basis of inequality, especially the unique form that it takes under capitalism. However, Marx’s approach is different from many of the theories that we examine in this book. For Marx, a theory about how society works would be partial, because what he mainly sought was a theory about how to change society. Marx’s theory, then, is an analysis of inequality under capitalism and how to change it.

As capitalism has come to dominate the globe and the most significant communist alternatives have disappeared, some might argue that Marx’s theories have lost their relevance. However, once we realize that Marx provides an analysis of capitalism, we can see that his theories are more relevant now than ever (Antonio, 2011; McLennan, 2001:43). Marx provides a diagnosis of capitalism that is able to reveal its tendencies to crises, point out its perennial inequalities, and, if nothing else, demand that capitalism live up to its own promises. The example of Marx makes an important point about theory. Even when their particular predictions are disproved—even though the proletariat revolution that Marx believed to be imminent did not come about—theories still hold a value as an alternative to our current society. Theories may not tell us what will happen, but they can argue for what should happen and help us develop a plan for carrying out the change that the theory envisions or for resisting the change that the theory predicts.
The Dialectic

Vladimir Lenin (1972:180) said that no one can fully understand Marx's work without a prior understanding of the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. We can only hope that this is not true, because Hegel was one of the most purposefully difficult philosophers ever to have written. Nevertheless, we must understand some of Hegel in order to appreciate the central Marxian conception of the dialectic.

The idea of a dialectical philosophy had been around for centuries (Gadamer, 1989). Its basic idea is the centrality of contradiction. While most philosophies, and indeed common sense, treat contradictions as mistakes, a dialectical philosophy believes that contradictions exist in reality and that the most appropriate way to understand reality is to study the development of those contradictions. Hegel used the idea of contradiction to understand historical change. According to Hegel, historical change has been driven by the contradictory understandings that are the essence of reality, by our attempts to resolve the contradictions, and by the new contradictions that develop.

Marx also accepted the centrality of contradictions to historical change. We see this in such well-known formulations as the “contradictions of capitalism” and “class contradictions.” However, unlike Hegel, Marx did not believe that these contradictions could be worked out in our understanding, that is, in our minds. Instead, for Marx these are real, existing contradictions (Wilde, 1991:277). For Marx, such contradictions are resolved not by the philosopher sitting in an armchair but by a life-and-death struggle that changes the social world. This was a crucial transformation because it allowed Marx to move the dialectic out of the realm of philosophy and into the realm of a study of social relations grounded in the material world. It is this focus that makes Marx’s work so relevant to sociology, even though the dialectical approach is very different from the mode of thinking used by most sociologists. The dialectic leads to an interest in the conflicts and contradictions among various levels of social reality, rather than to the more traditional sociological interest in the ways these various levels mesh neatly into a cohesive whole.

For example, one of the contradictions within capitalism is the relationship between the workers and the capitalists who own the factories and other means of production with which the work is done. The capitalist must exploit the workers in order to make a profit from the workers’ labor. The workers, in contradiction to the capitalists, want to keep at least some of the profit for themselves. Marx believed that this contradiction was at the heart of capitalism, and that it would grow worse as capitalists drove more and more people to become workers by forcing small firms out of business and as competition between the capitalists forced them to further exploit the workers to make a profit. As capitalism expands, the number of workers exploited, as well as the degree of exploitation, increases. This contradiction can be resolved not through philosophy but only through social change. The tendency for the level of exploitation to escalate leads to more and more resistance by the workers. Resistance begets more exploitation and oppression, and the likely result is a confrontation between the two classes (Boswell and Dixon, 1993).
Dialectical Method

Marx’s focus on real, existing contradictions led to a particular method for studying social phenomena that has also come to be called “dialectical” (T. Ball, 1991; Friedrichs, 1972; Ollman, 1976; L. Schneider, 1971; Starosta, 2008).

Fact and Value

In dialectical analysis, social values are not separable from social facts. Many sociologists believe that their values can and must be separated from their study of facts about the social world. The dialectical thinker believes that it is not only impossible to keep values out of the study of the social world but also undesirable, because to do so would produce a dispassionate, inhuman sociology that has little to offer to people in search of answers to the problems they confront. Facts and values are inevitably intertwined, with the result that the study of social phenomena is value-laden. Thus, to Marx it was impossible and, even if possible, undesirable to be dispassionate in his analysis of capitalist society. But Marx’s emotional involvement in what he was studying did not mean that his observations were inaccurate. It could even be argued that Marx’s passionate views on these issues gave him unparalleled insight into the nature of capitalist society. A less passionate student might have delved less deeply into the dynamics of the system. In fact, research into the work of scientists indicates that the idea of a dispassionate scientist is largely a myth and that the very best scientists are the ones who are most passionate about, and committed to, their ideas (Mitroff, 1974).

Reciprocal Relations

The dialectical method of analysis does not see a simple, one-way, cause-and-effect relationship among the various parts of the social world. For the dialectical thinker, social influences never simply flow in one direction as they often do for cause-and-effect thinkers. To the dialectician, one factor may have an effect on another, but it is just as likely that the latter will have a simultaneous effect on the former. For example, the increasing exploitation of the workers by the capitalist may cause the workers to become increasingly dissatisfied and more militant, but the increasing militancy of the proletariat may well cause the capitalists to react by becoming even more exploitative in order to crush the resistance of the workers. This kind of thinking does not mean that the dialectician never considers causal relationships in the social world. It does mean that when dialectical thinkers talk about causality, they are always attuned to reciprocal relationships among social factors as well as to the dialectical totality of social life in which they are embedded.

Past, Present, Future

Dialecticians are interested not only in the relationships of social phenomena in the contemporary world but also in the relationship of those contemporary realities to both past (Bauman, 1976:81) and future social phenomena. This has two distinct implications for a dialectical sociology. First, it means that dialectical sociologists are concerned with studying the historical roots of the contemporary world as Marx (1857–1858/1964) did in his study of the sources of modern capitalism. In fact, dialectical thinkers are very critical of
modern sociology for its failure to do much historical research. A good example of Marx’s thinking in this regard is found in the following famous quotation from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

(Marx, 1852/1970:15)

Second, many dialectical thinkers are attuned to current social trends in order to understand the possible future directions of society. This interest in future possibilities is one of the main reasons dialectical sociology is inherently political. It is interested in encouraging practical activities that can bring new possibilities into existence. However, dialecticians believe that the nature of this future world can be discerned only through a careful study of the contemporary world. It is their view that the sources of the future exist in the present.

**No Inevitabilities**

The dialectical view of the relationship between the present and the future need not imply that the future is determined by the present. Terence Ball (1991) described Marx as a “political possibilist” rather than a “historical inevitabilist.” Because social phenomena are constantly acting and reacting, the social world defies a simple, deterministic model. The future may be based on some contemporary model, but not inevitably. Marx’s historical studies showed him that people make choices but that these choices are limited. For instance, Marx believed that society was engaged in a class struggle and that people could choose to participate either in “the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx and Engels 1848/1948). Marx hoped and believed that the future was to be found in communism, but he did not believe that the workers could simply wait passively for it to arrive. Communism would come only through their choices and struggles.

This disinclination to think deterministically is what makes the best-known model of the dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—inadequate for sociological use. This simple model implies that a social phenomenon will inevitably spawn an opposing form and that the clash between the two will inevitably lead to a new, synthetic social form. But in the real world, there are no inevitabilities. Furthermore, social phenomena are not easily divided into the simple thesis, antithesis, and synthesis categories adopted by some Marxists. The dialectician is interested in the study of real relationships rather than grand abstractions. It is this disinclination to deal in grand abstractions that led Marx away from Hegel and would lead him today to reject such a great oversimplification of the dialectic as thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

**Actors and Structures**

Dialectical thinkers are also interested in the dynamic relationship between actors and social structures. Marx was certainly attuned to the ongoing interplay among the major levels of social analysis. The heart of Marx’s
thought lies in the relationship between people and the large-scale structures they create (Lefebvre, 1968:8). On the one hand, these large-scale structures help people fulfill themselves; on the other, they represent a grave threat to humanity. But the dialectical method is even more complex than this, because, as we have already seen, the dialectician considers past, present, and future circumstances—both actors and structures. Figure 6.1 is a simplified schematic representation of this enormously complex and sophisticated perspective.

Figure 2.1 Schematic Representation of a Sociologically Relevant Dialectic

![Diagram showing the relationship between large-scale structures and actors in the past, present, and future.](image-url)
Human Potential

A good portion of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of Marx's macrosociology, in particular his analysis of the macrostructures of capitalism. But before we can analyze these topics, we need to begin with Marx's thoughts on the more microsociological aspects of social reality. Marx built his critical analysis of the contradictions of capitalist society on his premises about human potential, its relation to labor, and its potential for alienation under capitalism. He believed that there was a real contradiction between our human potential and the way that we must work in capitalist society.

Marx (1850/1964:64) wrote in an early work that human beings are an “ensemble of social relations.” He indicates by this that our human potential is intertwined with our specific social relations and our institutional context. Therefore, human nature is not a static thing but varies historically and socially. To understand human potential, we need to understand social history, because human nature is shaped by the same dialectical contradictions that Marx believed shapes the history of society.

For Marx, a conception of human potential that does not take social and historical factors into account is wrong, but to take them into account is not the same as being without a conception of human nature. It simply complicates this conception. For Marx, there is a human potential in general, but what is more important is the way it is “modified in each historical epoch” (Marx, 1867/1967:609). When speaking of our general human potential, Marx often used the term *species being*. By this he meant the potentials and powers that are uniquely human and that distinguish humans from other species.

Some Marxists, such as Louis Althusser (1969:229), have contended that the mature Marx did not believe in human nature. There are certainly reasons to downplay human nature for someone interested in changing society. Ideas about human nature—such as our “natural” greed, our “natural” tendency toward violence, our “natural” gender differences—have often been used to argue against any social change. Such conceptions of human nature are innately conservative. If our problems are due to human nature, we had better learn to just adapt instead of trying to change things.
Karl Marx was born in Trier, Prussia, on May 5, 1818 (Antonio, 2011; Beilharz, 2005b). His father, a lawyer, provided the family with a fairly typical middle-class existence. Both parents were from rabbinitical families, but for business reasons the father had converted to Lutheranism when Karl was very young. In 1841 Marx received his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin, a school heavily influenced by Hegel and the Young Hegelians, supportive, yet critical, of their master. Marx's doctorate was a dry philosophical treatise, but it did anticipate many of his later ideas. After graduation he became a writer for a liberal-radical newspaper and within ten months had become its editor in chief. However, because of its political positions, the paper was closed shortly thereafter by the government. The early essays published in this period began to reflect a number of the positions that would guide Marx throughout his life. They were liberally sprinkled with democratic principles, humanism, and youthful idealism. He rejected the abstractness of Hegelian philosophy, the naive dreaming of utopian communists, and those activists who were urging what he considered to be premature political action. In rejecting these activists, Marx laid the groundwork for his own life's work:

Practical attempts, even by the masses, can be answered with a cannon as soon as they become dangerous, but ideas that have overcome our intellect and conquered our conviction, ideas to which reason has riveted our conscience, are chains from which one cannot break loose without breaking one's heart; they are demons that one can only overcome by submitting to them.

(Marx, 1842/1977:20)

Marx married in 1843 and soon thereafter was forced to leave Germany for the more liberal atmosphere of Paris. There he continued to grapple with the ideas of Hegel and his supporters, but he also encountered two new sets of ideas—French socialism and English political economy. It was the unique way in which he combined Hegelianism, socialism, and political economy that shaped his intellectual orientation. Also of great importance at this point was his meeting the man who was to become his lifelong friend,
benefactor, and collaborator—Friedrich Engels (Carver, 1983). The son of a textile manufacturer, Engels had become a socialist
critical of the conditions facing the working class. Much of Marx’s compassion for the misery of the working class came from his
exposure to Engels and his ideas. In 1844 Engels and Marx had a lengthy conversation in a famous café in Paris and laid the
groundwork for a lifelong association. Of that conversation Engels said, “Our complete agreement in all theoretical fields became
obvious … and our joint work dates from that time” (McLellan, 1973:131). In the following year, Engels published a notable work,
The Condition of the Working Class in England. During this period Marx wrote a number of abstruse works (many unpublished in
his lifetime), including The Holy Family (1845/1956) and The German Ideology (1845–1846/1970) (both coauthored with Engels),
but he also produced The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (1932/1964), which better foreshadowed his increasing
preoccupation with the economic domain.

Although Marx and Engels shared a theoretical orientation, there were many differences between the two men. Marx tended to be
theoretical, a disorderly intellectual, and very oriented to his family. Engels was a practical thinker, a neat and tidy businessman, and
a person who did not believe in the institution of the family. In spite of their differences, Marx and Engels forged a close union in
which they collaborated on books and articles and worked together in radical organizations. Engels even helped support Marx
throughout the rest of his life so that Marx could devote himself to his intellectual and political endeavors.

In spite of the close association of the names of Marx and Engels, Engels made it clear that he was the junior partner:

Marx could very well have done without me. What Marx accomplished I would not have achieved. Marx stood higher, saw
farther, and took a wider and quicker view than the rest of us. Marx was a genius.


In fact, many believe that Engels failed to understand many of the subtleties of Marx’s work (C. Smith, 1997). After Marx’s death,
Engels became the leading spokesperson for Marxian theory and in various ways distorted and oversimplified it, although he
remained faithful to the political perspective he had forged with Marx.

Because some of his writings had upset the Prussian government, the French government (at the request of the Prussians) expelled
Marx in 1845, and he moved to Brussels. His radicalism was growing, and he had become an active member of the international
revolutionary movement. He also associated with the Communist League and was asked to write a document (with Engels)
expounding its aims and beliefs. The result was the Communist Manifesto (1848/1948), a work that was characterized by ringing
political slogans (e.g., “Working men of all countries, unite!”).

In 1849 Marx moved to London, and, in light of the failure of the political revolutions of 1848, he began to withdraw from active
revolutionary activity and to move into more serious and detailed research on the workings of the capitalist system. In 1852 he began
his famous studies in the British Museum of the working conditions in capitalism. These studies ultimately resulted in the three
volumes of Capital, the first of which was published in 1867; the other two were published posthumously. He lived in poverty during
these years, barely managing to survive on a small income from his writings and the support of Engels. In 1864 Marx became
reinvolved in political activity by joining the International, an international movement of workers. He soon gained preeminence
within the movement and devoted a number of years to it. He began to gain fame both as a leader of the International and as the
author of Capital. But the disintegration of the International by 1876, the failure of various revolutionary movements, and personal
illness took their toll on Marx. His wife died in 1881, a daughter in 1882, and Marx himself on March 14, 1883.

Nevertheless, there is much evidence that Marx did have a notion of human nature (Geras, 1983). Indeed, it
makes little sense to say there is no human nature. Even if we are like a blank chalkboard, the chalkboard
must be made out of something and must have a nature such that chalk marks can show up on it. Some
conception of human nature is part of any sociological theory. Our concept of human nature dictates how
society can be sustained and how it can be changed, but most important for Marx’s theory, it suggests how
society should be changed. The real question is not whether we have a human nature, but what kind of nature
it is—unchanging or open to historical processes (the use of the idea of human potential here indicates that we
think it is open).
Unless we confront the idea, however dangerous, of our human nature and species being and get some understanding of them, we cannot know what it is we might be alienated from or what emancipation might mean. Nor can we determine which of our "slumbering powers" must be awakened to achieve emancipatory goals. A working definition of human nature, however tentative and insecure, is a necessary step in the search for real as opposed to fantastic alternatives. A conversation about our “species being” is desperately called for.

(Harvey, 2000:207)

**Labor**

For Marx, species being and human potential are intimately related to labor:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature…. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway…. We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process we get a result that existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose.

(Marx, 1867/1967:177–178)

We see in that quotation many important parts of Marx’s view of the relation between labor and human nature. First, what distinguishes us from other animals—our species being—is that our labor creates something in reality that previously existed only in our imagination. Our production reflects our purpose. Marx called this process in which we create external objects out of our internal thoughts objectification. Second, this labor is material (Sayers, 2007). It works with the more material aspects of nature (e.g., raising fruits and vegetables, cutting down trees for wood) in order to satisfy our material needs. Finally, Marx believed that this labor does not just transform the material aspects of nature but also transforms us, including our needs, our consciousness, and our human nature. Labor is thus at the same time (1) the objectification of our purpose, (2) the establishment of an essential relation between human need and the material objects of our need, and (3) the transformation of our human nature.

Marx’s use of the term labor is not restricted to economic activities; it encompasses all productive actions that transform the material aspects of nature in accordance with our purpose. Whatever is created through this free purposive activity is both an expression of our human nature and a transformation of it.
As we will see later, the process of labor has been changed under capitalism, making it difficult for us to understand Marx's conception, but we get close to Marx's concept when we think of the creative activity of an artist. Artwork is a representation of the thought of the artist. In Marx's terms, artwork is an objectification of the artist. However, it is also true that the process of creating the art changes the artist. Through the process of producing the art, the artist's ideas about the art change, or the artist may become aware of a new vision that needs objectification. In addition, the completed artwork can take on a new meaning for the artist and transform the artist's conceptions of that particular work or of art in general.

Labor, even artistic labor, is in response to a need, and the transformation that labor entails also transforms our needs. The satisfaction of our needs can lead to the creation of new needs (Marx and Engels, 1845–1846/1970:43). For example, the production of cars to satisfy our need for long-distance transportation led to a new need for highways. Even more significantly, although few people thought they needed cars when cars were first invented, now most people feel that they need them. A similar change has occurred with the mobile phone (e.g., the iPhone). Whereas a generation ago few thought they needed a mobile phone, now many people need one and regularly purchase updated models as they become available.

We labor in response to our needs, but the labor itself transforms our needs, which can lead to new forms of productive activity. According to Marx, this transformation of our needs through labor is the engine of human history.

Not only do the objective conditions change in the act of production ... but the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language.


Labor, for Marx, is the development of our truly human powers and potentials. By transforming material reality to fit our purpose, we also transform ourselves. Furthermore, labor is a social activity. Work involves others, directly in joint productions, or because others provide us with the necessary tools or raw materials for our work, or because they enjoy the fruits of our labor. Labor does not transform only the individual human; it also transforms society. Indeed, for Marx, the emergence of a human as an individual depends on a society. Marx wrote, “Man is in the most literal sense of the word a zoon politikon, not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society” (1857–1858/1964:84). In addition, Marx wrote that this transformation includes even our consciousness: "Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (Marx and Engels, 1845–1846/1970:51). Consequently, the transformation of the individual through labor and the transformation of society are not separable.
Alienation

Although Marx believed that there is an inherent relation between labor and human nature, he thought that this relation is perverted by capitalism. He called this perverted relation *alienation* (Beilharz, 2005a; D. Cooper, 1991; Meisenhelder, 1991). The present discussion of Marx's concept of human nature and of alienation is derived mainly from Marx's early work. In his later work on the nature of capitalist society, he shied away from such a heavily philosophical term as *alienation*, yet alienation remained one of his main concerns (Barbalet, 1983:95).

Marx analyzed the peculiar form that our relation to our own labor has taken under capitalism. We no longer see our labor as an expression of our purpose. There is no objectification. Instead, we labor in accordance with the purpose of the capitalist who hires and pays us. Rather than being an end in itself—an expression of human capabilities—labor in capitalism is reduced to being a means to an end: earning money (Marx, 1932/1964:173). Because our labor is not our own, it no longer transforms us. Instead we are alienated from our labor and therefore alienated from our true human nature.

Although it is the individual who feels alienated in capitalist society, Marx's basic analytic concern was with the structures of capitalism that cause this alienation (Israel, 1971). Marx used the concept of alienation to reveal the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings and on society. Of crucial significance here is the two-class system in which capitalists employ workers (and thereby own workers' labor time) and capitalists own the means of production (tools and raw materials) as well as the ultimate products. To survive, workers are forced to sell their labor time to capitalists. These structures, especially the division of labor, are the sociological basis of alienation.

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor therefore is not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.

(Marx, 1850/1964:72)

As a result, people feel freely active only in their animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating. In the essentially human process of labor, they no longer feel themselves to be anything but animals. What is animal becomes human, and what is human becomes animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, and so on, are human functions, but when separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends, they become animal functions.

Alienation can be seen as having four basic components. First, workers in capitalist society are alienated from
their productive activity. They do not produce objects according to their own ideas or to directly satisfy their own needs. Instead, workers work for capitalists, who pay them a subsistence wage in return for the right to use them in any way they see fit. Because productive activity belongs to the capitalists, and because they decide what is to be done with it, we can say that workers are alienated from that activity. Furthermore, many workers who perform highly specialized tasks have little sense of their role in the total production process. For example, automobile assembly-line workers who tighten a few bolts on an engine may have little feel for how their labor contributes to the production of the entire car. They do not objectify their ideas, and they are not transformed by the labor in any meaningful way. Instead of being a process that is satisfying in and of itself, productive activity in capitalism is reduced, Marx argued, to an often boring and stultifying means to the fulfillment of the only end that really matters in capitalism: earning enough money to survive.

Second, the workers in capitalist society are alienated not only from productive activities but also from the object of those activities—the product. The product of their labor belongs not to the workers but to the capitalists, who may use it in any way they wish because it is the capitalists’ private property. Marx (1932/1964:117) wrote, “Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labour.” The capitalist will use his or her ownership in order to sell the product for a profit. If workers wish to own the product of their own labor, they must buy it like anyone else. No matter how desperate the workers’ needs, they cannot use the products of their own labor to satisfy their needs. Even workers in a bakery can starve if they don’t have the money to buy the bread that they make. Because of this peculiar relation, things that we buy—that are made by others—seem to us to be more an expression of ourselves than do the things we make at our jobs. People’s personalities are judged more by the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, the gadgets they use—none of which they have made—than by what they actually produce in their daily work, which appears to be an arbitrary and accidental means for making money in order to buy things.

Third, workers in capitalist society are alienated from their fellow workers. Marx’s assumption was that people basically need and want to work cooperatively in order to appropriate from nature what they require to survive. But in capitalism this cooperation is disrupted, and people, often strangers, are forced to work side by side for the capitalist. Even if the workers on the assembly line are close friends, the nature of the technology makes for a great deal of isolation. Here is the way one worker described his social situation on the assembly line:

You can work next to a guy for months without even knowing his name. One thing, you’re too busy to talk. Can’t hear …. You have to holler in his ear. They got these little guys coming around in white shirts and if they see you runnin’ your mouth, they say, “This guy needs more work.” Man, he’s got no time to talk.

(Terkel, 1974:165)

Of course, much the same is true in the newest version of the assembly line: the office cubicle. But in this social situation, workers experience something worse than simple isolation. Workers often are forced into
outright competition, and sometimes conflict, with one another. To extract maximum productivity and to prevent the development of cooperative relationships, the capitalist pits one worker against another to see who can produce more, work more quickly, or please the boss more. The workers who succeed are given a few extra rewards; those who fail are discarded. In either case, considerable hostility is generated among the workers toward their peers. This is useful to the capitalists because it tends to deflect hostility that otherwise would be aimed at them. The isolation and the interpersonal hostility tend to alienate workers in capitalism from their fellow workers.

Finally, workers in capitalist society are alienated from their own human potential. Instead of being a source of transformation and fulfillment of our human nature, the workplace is where we feel least human, least ourselves. Individuals perform less and less like human beings as they are reduced in their work to functioning like machines. Even smiles and greetings are programmed and scripted. Consciousness is numbed and, ultimately, destroyed as relations with other humans and with nature are progressively controlled. The result is a mass of people unable to express their essential human qualities, a mass of alienated workers.

Alienation is an example of the sort of contradiction that Marx’s dialectical approach focused on. There is a real contradiction between human nature, which is defined and transformed by labor, and the actual social conditions of labor under capitalism. What Marx wanted to stress is that this contradiction cannot be resolved merely in thought. We are not any less alienated because we identify with our employer or with the things that our wages can purchase. Indeed, these things are a symptom of our alienation, which can be resolved only through real social change.
The Structures of Capitalist Society

In Europe in Marx's time, industrialization was increasing. People were being forced to leave agricultural and artisan trades and to work in factories where conditions were often harsh. By the 1840s, when Marx was entering his most productive period, Europe was experiencing a widespread sense of social crisis (Seigel, 1978:106). In 1848 a series of revolts swept across Europe (soon after the publication of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*). The effects of industrialization and the political implications of industrialization were especially apparent in the mostly rural states collectively referred to as Germany.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, cheap manufactured goods from England and France began to force out of business the less efficient manufacturers in Germany. In response, the political leaders of the German states imposed capitalism on their still mainly feudal societies. The resulting poverty, dislocation, and alienation were particularly evident because of the rapidity of the change.

Marx's analysis of alienation was a response to the economic, social, and political changes that Marx saw going on around him. He did not view alienation as a philosophical problem. He wanted to understand what changes would be needed to create a society in which human potential could be adequately expressed. Marx's important insight was that the capitalist economic system is the primary cause of alienation. Marx's work on human nature and alienation led him to a critique of capitalist society and to a political program oriented to overcoming the structures of capitalism so that people could express their essential humanity (Mészáros, 1970).

Capitalism is an economic system in which great numbers of workers who own little produce commodities for the profit of small numbers of capitalists who own all of the following: the commodities, the means of producing the commodities, and the labor time of the workers, which they purchase through wages (Wolf, 2005b). One of Marx's central insights is that capitalism is much more than an economic system. It is also a system of power. The secret of capitalism is that political powers have been transformed into economic relations (Wood, 1995). Capitalists seldom need to use brute force. Capitalists are able to coerce workers through their power to dismiss workers and close plants. Capitalism, therefore, is not simply an economic system; it is also a political system, a mode of exercising power, and a process for exploiting workers.

In a capitalist system, the economy seems to be a natural force. People are laid off, wages are reduced, and factories are closed because of “the economy.” We do not see these events as the outcomes of social or political decisions. Links between human suffering and the economic structures are deemed irrelevant or trivial.

For example, you might read in the newspaper that the Federal Reserve Board of the United States has raised interest rates. A reason often given for this action is that the economy is “overheated,” which is to say that there is the possibility of inflation. Raising interest rates does indeed “cool off” the economy. How does it do so? It puts some people out of work. As a result, workers become afraid to demand higher wages, which might get passed on as higher prices, which might lead to additional interest-rate increases and to still more workers losing their jobs. Thus, inflation is averted. By raising interest rates, the Federal Reserve Board adopts a policy
that helps capitalists and hurts workers. This decision, however, usually is presented as a purely economic one. Marx would say that it is a political decision that favors capitalists at the expense of workers.

Marx’s aim was to make the social and political structures of the economy clearer by revealing “the economic law of motion of modern society” (quoted in Ollman, 1976:168). Furthermore, Marx intended to reveal the internal contradictions that he hoped would inevitably transform capitalism.

Commodities

The basis of all of Marx’s work on social structures, and the place in which that work is most clearly tied to his views on human potential, is his analysis of commodities, or products of labor intended primarily for exchange. As Georg Lukács (1922/1968:83) put it, “The problem of commodities is … the central, structural problem of capitalist society.” By starting with the commodity, Marx was able to reveal the nature of capitalism.

Marx’s view of the commodity was rooted in his materialist orientation, with its focus on the productive activities of actors. As we saw earlier, it was Marx’s view that in their interactions with nature and with other actors, people produce the objects that they need in order to survive. These objects are produced for personal use or for use by others in the immediate environment. Such uses are what Marx called the commodity’s use value. However, in capitalism this process takes on a new and dangerous form. Instead of producing for themselves or for their immediate associates, the actors produce for someone else (the capitalist). The products have exchange value; that is, instead of being used immediately, they are exchanged in the market for money or for other objects.

Use value is connected to the intimate relation between human needs and the actual objects that can satisfy those needs. It is difficult to compare the use values of different things. Bread has the use value of satisfying hunger; shoes have the use value of protecting our feet. It is difficult to say that one has more use value than the other. They are qualitatively different. Furthermore, use value is tied to the physical properties of a commodity. Shoes cannot satisfy our hunger and bread cannot protect our feet because they are physically different kinds of objects. In the process of exchange, however, different commodities are compared to one another. One pair of shoes can be exchanged for six loaves of bread. Or if the medium of exchange is money, as is common, a pair of shoes can be worth six times as much money as a loaf of bread. Exchange values are quantitatively different. One can say that a pair of shoes has more exchange value than a loaf of bread. Furthermore, exchange value is separate from the physical property of the commodity. Only things that can be eaten can have the use value of satisfying hunger, but any type of thing can have the exchange value of a dollar.

Fetishism of Commodities

Commodities are the products of human labor, but they can become separated from the needs and purposes of their creators. Because exchange value floats free from the actual commodity and seems to exist in a realm separate from any human use, we are led to believe that these objects and the market for them have
independent existences. In fully developed capitalism, this belief becomes reality as the objects and their markets actually become real, independent phenomena. The commodity takes on an independent, almost mystical external reality (Marx, 1867/1967:35). Marx called this process the *fetishism of commodities* (Dant, 1996; Sherlock, 1997). Marx did not mean that commodities take on sexual meanings, for he wrote before Freud gave the term *fetish* this twist. Marx was alluding to the ways in which the practitioners of some religions, such as the Zunis, carve figures and then worship them. By fetish, Marx meant a thing that we ourselves make and then worship as if it were a god.

In capitalism, the products that we make, their values, and the economy that consists of our exchanges all seem to take on lives of their own, separate from any human needs or decisions. Even our own labor—the thing that, according to Marx, makes us truly human—becomes a commodity that is bought and sold. Our labor acquires an exchange value that is separate from us. It is turned into an abstract thing and used by the capitalist to make the objects that come to dominate us. Hence, commodities are the source of the alienation discussed earlier. Even the labor of self-employed commodity producers is alienated, because they must produce for the market instead of to achieve their own purposes and satisfy their own needs.

Thus, the economy takes on a function that Marx believed only actors could perform: the production of value. For Marx, the true value of a thing comes from the fact that labor produces it and someone needs it. A commodity’s true value represents human social relations. In contrast, in capitalism, Marx wrote, “A definite social relation between men … assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (1867/1967:72). Granting reality to commodities and to the market, the individual in capitalism progressively loses control over them. A commodity, therefore, is “a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor: because the relations of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor” (72).

Think, for example, of the cup of coffee that you might have bought before sitting down to read this text. In that simple transaction, you entered into a relationship with hundreds of others: the waitperson, the owner of the coffee shop, the people working at the roaster, the owner of the coffee plantation owner, the pickers, and so on. In addition, you supported a particular trading relation between countries, a particular form of government in the grower’s country that has been historically shaped by the coffee trade, a particular relation between the plantation owner and the worker, and many other social relations. You did all this by exchanging money for a cup of coffee. In the relation between those objects—money and coffee—lies hidden all those social relations.

Marx’s discussion of commodities and their fetishism takes us from the level of the individual actor to the level of large-scale social structures. The fetishism of commodities imparts to the economy an independent, objective reality that is external to, and coercive of, the actor. Looked at in this way, the fetishism of commodities is translated into the concept of *reification* (Lukács, 1922/1968; Sherlock, 1997). Reification can be thought of as “thingification,” or the process of coming to believe that humanly created social forms are natural, universal, and absolute things. As a result of reification, social forms do acquire those characteristics.
The concept of reification implies that people believe that social structures are beyond their control and unchangeable. Reification occurs when this belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Then structures actually do acquire the character people endowed them with. People become mesmerized by the seeming objectivity and authority of the economy. People lose their jobs, make career choices, or move across the country because of the economy. According to Marx, however, the economy is not an objective, natural thing. It is a form of domination, and decisions about interest rates and layoffs are political decisions that tend to benefit one group over another.

People reify the whole range of social relationships and social structures. Just as people reify commodities and other economic phenomena (e.g., the division of labor [Rattansi, 1982; Wallimann, 1981]), they also reify religious (Barbalet, 1983:147), political, and organizational structures. Marx made a similar point in reference to the state: “And out of this very contradiction between the individual and … the community the latter takes an independent form as the State, divorced from the real interests of individual and community” (cited in Bender, 1970:176). Capitalism is made up of particular types of social relations that tend to take forms that appear to be and eventually are independent of the actual people involved. As Moishe Postone (1993:4) wrote, “The result is a new, increasingly abstract form of social domination—one that subjects people to impersonal structural imperatives and constraints that cannot be adequately grasped in terms of concrete domination (e.g., personal or group domination).”

**Capital, Capitalists, and the Proletariat**

Marx found the heart of capitalist society within the commodity. A society dominated by objects whose main value is exchange produces certain categories of people. The two main types that concerned Marx were the proletariat and the capitalist. Let us start with the proletariat.

Workers who sell their labor and do not own their own means of production are members of the proletariat. They do not own their own tools or their factories. Marx (1867/1967:714–715) believed that proletarians would eventually lose their own skills as they increasingly serviced machines that had their skills built into them. Because members of the proletariat produce only for exchange, they are also consumers. Because they don’t have the means to produce for their own needs, they must use their wages to buy what they need. Consequently, proletarians are completely dependent on their wages in order to live. This makes the proletariat dependent on those who pay the wages.

Those who pay the wages are the capitalists. Capitalists are those who own the means of production. Before we can fully understand capitalists, we must first understand capital itself (Wolf, 2005a). Capital is money that produces more money; capital is money that is invested rather than being used to satisfy human needs or desires. This distinction becomes clearer when we look at what Marx considered to be “the starting-point of capital” (1867/1967:146): the circulation of commodities. Marx discussed two types of circulation of commodities. One type of circulation is characteristic of capital: Money → Commodities → (a larger sum of) Money ($M_1 - C - M_2$). The other type is not: Commodities → Money → Commodities ($C_1 - M - C_2$).

In a noncapitalist circulation of commodities, the circuit $C_1 - M - C_2$ predominates. An example of $C_1 - M - C_2$
would be a fisherman who sells his catch ($C_1$) and then uses the money ($M$) to buy bread ($C_2$). The primary goal of exchange in noncapitalist circulation is a commodity that one can use and enjoy.

In a capitalist circulation of commodities ($M_1$-$C$-$M_2$), the primary goal is to produce more money. Commodities are purchased in order to generate profit, not necessarily for use. In the capitalist circuit, referred to by Marx as “buying in order to sell” (1867/1967:147), the individual actor buys a commodity with money and in turn exchanges the commodity for presumably more money. For example, a store owner would buy ($M_1$) the fish ($C$) in order to sell them for more money ($M_2$). To further increase profits, the store owner might buy the boat and fishing equipment and pay the fisherman a wage. The goal of this circuit is not the consumption of the use value, as it is in the simple circulation of commodities. The goal is more money. The particular properties of the commodity used to make money are irrelevant. The commodity can be fish or it can be labor. Also, the real needs and desires of human beings are irrelevant; all that matters is what will produce more money.

Capital is money that produces more money, but Marx said it is more than that: it is also a particular social relation. Money becomes capital only because of a social relation between, on the one hand, the proletariat, who does the work and must purchase the product, and, on the other hand, those who have invested the money. The capacity of capital to generate profit appears “as a power endowed by Nature—a productive power that is immanent in Capital” (1867/1967:333); but, according to Marx, it is a relation of power. Capital cannot increase except by exploiting those who actually do the work. The workers are exploited by a system, and the irony is that the system is produced through the workers’ own labor. The capitalist system is the social structure that emerges from that exploitive relationship.

Capitalists are those who live off the profit of capital. They are the beneficiaries of the proletariat’s exploitation. Within the idea of capital is contained a social relation between those who own the means of production and those whose wage labor is exploited.

**Exploitation**

For Marx, exploitation and domination reflect more than an accidentally unequal distribution of wealth and power. *Exploitation* is a necessary part of the capitalist economy. All societies have exploitation, but what is peculiar in capitalism is that the exploitation is accomplished by the impersonal and “objective” economic system. It seems to be less a matter of power and more a matter of economists’ charts and figures. Furthermore, the coercion is rarely naked force and is instead the worker’s own needs, which can now be satisfied only through wage labor. Dripping irony, Marx described the freedom of this wage labor:

> For the conversion of his money into capital … the owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realization of his labour-power.

(Marx, 1867/1967:169)
Workers appear to be “free laborers,” entering into free contracts with capitalists. But Marx believed that the workers must accept the terms the capitalists offer them, because the workers can no longer produce for their own needs. This is especially true because capitalism usually creates what Marx referred to as a reserve army of the unemployed. If a worker does not want to do a job at the wage the capitalist offers, someone else in the reserve army of the unemployed will. This, for example, is what Barbara Ehrenreich discovered is the purpose of many of the want ads for low-paying jobs:

Only later will I realize that the want ads are not a reliable measure of the actual jobs available at any particular time. They are … the employers’ insurance policy against the relentless turnover of the low-wage workforce. Most of the big hotels run ads almost continually if only to build a supply of applicants to replace the current workers as they drift away or are fired.

(Ehrenreich, 2001:15)

The capitalists pay the workers less than the value that the workers produce and keep the rest for themselves. This practice leads us to Marx’s central concept of surplus value, which is defined as the difference between the value of the product when it is sold and the value of the elements consumed in the formation of that product (including the worker’s labor). The capitalists can use this profit for private consumption, but doing so would not lead to the expansion of capitalism. Rather, capitalists expand their enterprises by converting profit into a base for the creation of still more surplus value.

It should be stressed that surplus value is not simply an economic concept. Surplus value, like capital, is a particular social relation and a form of domination, because labor is the real source of surplus value. “The rate of surplus-value is therefore an exact expression for the degree of exploitation of labor-power by capital, or of the laborer by the capitalist” (Marx, 1867/1967:218). This observation points to one of Marx’s more colorful metaphors: “Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (233).

Marx (1857–1858/1974:414) makes one other important point about capital: “Capital exists and can only exist as many capitals.” What he means is that capitalism is always driven by incessant competition. Capitalists may seem to be in control, but even they are driven by the constant competition between capitals. The capitalist is driven to make more profit in order to accumulate and invest more capital. The capitalist who does not do this will be outcompeted by others who do. “As such, he shares with the miser an absolute drive towards self-enrichment. But what appears in the miser as the mania of an individual is in the capitalist the effect of a social mechanism in which he is merely a cog” (Marx, 1867/1967:739).

The desire for more profit and more surplus value for expansion pushes capitalism toward what Marx called the general law of capitalist accumulation. Capitalists seek to exploit workers as much as possible: “The constant tendency of capital is to force the cost of labor back towards … zero” (Marx, 1867/1967:600). Marx basically argued that the structure and the ethos of capitalism push capitalists in the direction of the accumulation of more and more capital. Given Marx’s view that labor is the source of value, capitalists are led to intensify the
exploitation of the proletariat, thereby driving class conflict.

**Class Conflict**

Marx often used the term *class* in his writings, but he never systematically defined what he meant (So and Suwarsono, 1990:35). He usually is taken to have meant a group of people in similar situations with respect to their control of the means of production. This, however, is not a complete description of the way Marx used the term. *Class,* for Marx, was always defined in terms of its potential for conflict. Individuals form a class insofar as they are in a common conflict with others over the surplus value. In capitalism there is an inherent conflict of interest between those who hire wage laborers and those whose labor is turned into surplus value. It is this inherent conflict that produces classes (Ollman, 1976).

Because class is defined by the potential for conflict, it is a theoretical and historically variant concept. A theory about where potential conflict exists in a society is required before identifying a class.4 Richard Miller (1991:99) stated that “there is no rule that could, in principle, be used to sort out people in a society into classes without studying the actual interactions among economic processes on the one hand and between political and cultural processes on the other.”

For Marx, a class truly exists only when people become aware of their conflicting relation to other classes. Without this awareness, they only constitute what Marx called a class *in itself.* When they become aware of the conflict, they become a true class, a class *for itself.*

In capitalism, Marx’s analysis discovered two primary classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat.5 Bourgeoisie is Marx’s name for capitalists in the modern economy. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production and employs wage labor. The conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is another example of a real material contradiction. This contradiction grows out of the previously mentioned contradiction between labor and capitalism. None of these contradictions can be resolved except by changing the capitalist structure. In fact, until that change occurs, the contradiction will only become worse. Society will be increasingly polarized into these two great opposing classes. Competition with megastores and franchise chains will shut down many small, independent businesses; mechanization will replace skilled artisans; and even some capitalists will be squeezed out through attempts to establish monopolies, for example, by means of mergers. All these displaced people will be forced down into the ranks of the proletariat. Marx called this inevitable increase in the proletariat *proletarianization.*

In addition, because capitalists have already reduced the workers to laboring machines performing a series of simple operations, mechanization becomes increasingly easy. As mechanization proceeds, more and more people are put out of work and fall from the proletariat into the industrial reserve army. In the end, Marx foresaw a situation in which society would be characterized by a tiny number of exploitative capitalists and a huge mass of proletarians and members of the industrial reserve army. By reducing so many people to this condition, capitalism creates the masses that will lead to its own overthrow. The increased centralization of factory work, as well as the shared suffering, increases the possibility of an organized resistance to capitalism. Furthermore, the international linking of factories and markets encourages workers to be aware of more than
their own local interests. This awareness is likely to lead to revolution.

The capitalists, of course, seek to forestall this revolution. For example, they sponsor colonial adventures with the objective of shifting at least some of the burden of exploitation from the home front to the colonies. However, in Marx’s view (1867/1967:10), these efforts are doomed to failure because the capitalist is as much controlled by the laws of the capitalist economy as are the workers. Capitalists are under competitive pressure from one another, forcing each to try to reduce labor costs and intensify exploitation—even though this intensified exploitation will increase the likelihood of revolution and therefore contribute to the capitalists’ demise. Even good-hearted capitalists will be forced to further exploit their workers in order to compete: “The law of capitalist accumulation, metamorphosed by economists into pretended law of nature, in reality merely states that the very nature of accumulation excludes every diminution in the degree of exploitation” (582).

Marx usually did not blame individual members of the bourgeoisie for their actions; he saw these actions as largely determined by the logic of the capitalist system. This is consistent with his view that actors in capitalism generally are devoid of creative independence. However, the developmental process inherent in capitalism provides the conditions necessary for the ultimate reemergence of such creative action and, with it, the overthrow of the capitalist system. The logic of the capitalist system is forcing the capitalists to produce more exploited proletarians, and these are the very people who will bring an end to capitalism through their revolt. “What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, is, above all, its own gravediggers” (Marx and Engels, 1848/1948).

It is not only the ultimate proletariat revolution that Marx saw as caused by the underlying contradictions of capitalism, but also many of the various personal and social crises that beset modern society. On the personal side, we have already discussed some of the facets of the alienation that Marx believed was at the root of the feeling of meaninglessness in so many people’s lives. At the economic level, Marx predicted a series of booms and depressions as capitalists overproduced or laid off workers in their attempts to increase their profits. At the political level, Marx predicted the increasing inability of a civil society to discuss and solve social problems. Instead we would see the growth of a state whose only purposes are the protection of the capitalists’ private property and an occasional brutal intervention when economic coercion by the capitalists fails.

**Capitalism as a Good Thing**

Despite his focus on the inevitable crises of capitalism and his portrayal of it as a system of domination and exploitation, Marx saw capitalism as primarily a good thing. Certainly, Marx did not want to return to the traditional values of precapitalism. Past generations were just as exploited; the only difference is that the old exploitation was not veiled behind an economic system. The birth of capitalism opened up new possibilities for the freedom of the workers. Notwithstanding its exploitation, the capitalist system provides the possibility for freedom from the traditions that bound all previous societies. Even if the worker is not yet truly free, the promise is there. Similarly, as the most powerful economic system ever developed, capitalism holds the promise of freedom from hunger and from other forms of material deprivation. It was from the viewpoint of these promises that Marx criticized capitalism.
In addition, Marx believed that capitalism is the root cause of the defining characteristics of the modern age. Modernity’s constant change and propensity to challenge all accepted traditions are driven by the inherent competition of capitalism, which pushes capitalists to continuously revolutionize the means of production and transform society:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

(Marx and Engels, 1848/1948:11)

Capitalism has been a truly revolutionary force. It has created a global society; it has introduced unrelenting technological change; it has overthrown the traditional world. But now, Marx believed, it must be overthrown. Capitalism’s role is finished, and it is time for the new stage of communism to begin.
Materialist Conception of History

Marx was able to criticize capitalism from the perspective of its future because of his belief that history would follow a predictable course. This belief was based on his materialist conception of history (often simply shortened to the term *historical materialism* [Vandenbergh, 2005]). The general claim of Marx's historical materialism is that the way in which people provide for their material needs determines or, in general, conditions the relations that people have with each other, their social institutions, and even their prevalent ideas.

Because of the importance of the way in which people provide for their material needs, this, along with the resultant economic relations, is often referred to as the *base*. Noneconomic relations, other social institutions, and prevalent ideas are referred to as the *superstructure*. It should be noted that Marx's view of history does not envision a straightforward trend in which the superstructure simply comes into line with the base. Human history is set into motion by the attempt to satisfy needs, but as noted earlier, these needs themselves are historically changing. Consequently, advances in the satisfaction of needs tend to produce more needs so that human needs are both the motivating foundation and the result of the economic base.

The following quotation is one of Marx's best summaries of his materialist conception of history:

> In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will. These relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, which is the real foundation on top of which arises a legal and political superstructure to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then occurs a period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

(Marx, 1859/1970:20–21)

The place to start in that quotation is with the “material forces of production.” These are the actual tools, machinery, factories, and so forth, used to satisfy human needs. The “relations of production” are the kinds of associations that people have with each other in satisfying their needs.

Marx's theory holds that a society will tend to adopt the system of social relations that best facilitates the employment and development of its productive powers. Therefore, the relations of production correspond to the state of the material forces of production. For example, certain stages of low technology correspond to social relations characterized by a few large landowners and a large number of serfs who work the land in return for a share of the produce. The higher technology of capitalism corresponds to a few capitalists who are
able to invest in the expensive machinery and factories and a large number of wage workers. As Marx succinctly, if somewhat simplistically, put it, "the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the capitalist" (Marx, 1847/1963:95). Marx added that these relations between people also can be expressed as property relations: the capitalist owns the means of production, and the wage laborer does not.

Capitalist economies foster unique relations between people and create certain expectations, obligations, and duties. For example, wage laborers must show a certain deference to capitalists if they want to keep their jobs. For Marx, what was important about these relations of production was their propensity to class conflict, but it is also possible to see the effect of the relations of production in family and personal relations. The socialization necessary to produce the “good” male worker also produces a certain type of husband. Similarly, early capitalism’s requirement that the man leave the home to work all day led to a definition of the mother as the primary caretaker of the children. Hence, changes in the forces of production led to deep changes in the family structure. These changes too can be seen as relations of production.

Marx never clearly stated where the relations of production leave off and the superstructure starts. However, he clearly felt that some relations and forms of “social consciousness” play only a supporting role in the material means of production. Marx predicted that although these elements of the superstructure are not directly involved, they tend to take a form that will support the relations of production.

Marx’s view of history was a dynamic one, and he therefore believed that the forces of production would change to better provide for material needs. For example, this is what happened with the advent of capitalism, when technological changes made factories possible. However, before capitalism could actually occur, there had to be changes in society, changes in the relations of production. Factories, capitalists, and wage laborers were not compatible with feudal relations. The feudal lords, who derived their wealth solely from the ownership of land and who felt a moral obligation to provide for their serfs, had to be replaced by capitalists who derived their wealth from capital and who felt no moral obligation to wage laborers. Similarly, the serf’s feeling of personal loyalty to the lord had to be replaced by proletarians’ willingness to sell their labor to whoever would pay. The old relations of production were in conflict with the new forces of production.

A revolution is often required to change the relations of production. The main source of revolution is the material contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production. However, revolution also results from another contradiction: between exploiters and the exploited. According to Marx, this contradiction, which has always existed, leads to revolutionary change when the exploited line up in support of a change in the relations of production that favors changes occurring in the forces of production. Marx did not believe that all workers’ revolts could be effective—only those in support of a change in the forces of production. An effective revolution, according to Marx, will cause the supporting relations, institutions, and prevalent ideas to change so that they validate the new relations of production.
Cultural Aspects of Capitalist Society

In addition to his focus on the material structures of capitalism, Marx also theorized about its cultural aspects.

Ideology

Not only do the existing relations of production tend to prevent changes necessary for the development of the forces of production, but similarly, the supporting relations, institutions, and, in particular, prevalent ideas also tend to prevent these changes. Marx called prevalent ideas that perform this function ideologies. As with many terms, Marx is not always precise in his use of the word ideology. He seems to use it to indicate two related sorts of ideas.

First, ideology refers to ideas that naturally emerge out of everyday life in capitalism but, because of the nature of capitalism, reflect reality in an inverted manner (Larrain, 1979). To explain this meaning of the term, Marx used the metaphor of a camera obscura, which employs an optical quirk to show a real image reflected upside down. This is the type of ideology represented by the fetishism of commodities or by money. Even though we know that money is nothing but a piece of paper that has value only because of underlying social relations, in our daily lives we treat money as though it had inherent value. Instead of our seeing that we give money its value, it often seems that money gives us our value.

This first type of ideology is vulnerable to disruption because it is based on underlying material contradictions. Human value is not really dependent on money, and we often meet people who are living proof of that contradiction. In fact, it is at this level that we usually become aware of the material contradictions that Marx believed would drive capitalism to the next phase. We become aware, for example, that the economy is not an objective, independent system but a political sphere. We become aware that our labor is not just another commodity and that its sale for wages produces alienation. Or if we don’t become aware of the underlying truth, we at least become aware of the disruption because of a blatant political move in the economic system or our own feeling of alienation. It is in addressing these disruptions that Marx’s second use of ideology is relevant.

When disruptions occur and the underlying material contradictions are revealed, or are in danger of being revealed, the second type of ideology will emerge. Here Marx used the term ideology to refer to systems of ruling ideas that attempt once again to hide the contradictions that are at the heart of the capitalist system. In most cases, they do this in one of three ways: (1) They lead to the creation of subsystems of ideas—a religion, a philosophy, a literature, a legal system—that make the contradictions appear to be coherent; (2) they explain away those experiences that reveal the contradictions, usually as personal problems or individual idiosyncrasies; or (3) they present the capitalist contradiction as really being a contradiction in human nature and therefore one that cannot be fixed by social change.

In general, members of the ruling class create this second type of ideology. For example, Marx refers to bourgeois economists who present the commodity form as natural and universal. Or he criticizes bourgeois philosophers, such as Hegel, for pretending that material contradictions can be resolved by changing how we
think. However, even the proletariat can create this type of ideology. People who have given up the hope of actually changing society need such ideologies. But no matter who creates them, these ideologies always benefit the ruling class by hiding the contradictions that would lead to social change.

**Freedom, Equality, and Ideology**

For an example of ideology, we look at Marx's ideas about the bourgeois conception of equality and freedom. According to Marx, our particular ideas of equality and freedom emerge out of capitalism. Although we take our belief in freedom and equality to be an obvious thing, any historical study will demonstrate that it is not. Most societies would have considered the idea that all people are essentially equal as absurd. For most cultures throughout history, slavery seemed quite natural. Now, under capitalism, we believe quite the opposite: inequality is absurd, and slavery is unnatural.

Marx thought that this change in our ideas could be traced to the everyday practices of capitalism. The act of exchange, which is the basis of capitalism, presupposes the equality of the people in the exchange, just as it presupposes the equality of the commodities in the exchange. For the commodities, the particular qualitative differences of their use values are hidden by their exchange value. In other words, apples and oranges are made equal by reducing them to their monetary value. The same thing happens to the differences between the people involved in the exchange. Most exchanges in advanced capitalism involve people who never meet and don't know each other. We don't care who grew the apples and oranges we buy. This anonymity and indifference constitute a kind of equality.

Furthermore, freedom is assumed in this exchange; that is, all partners to the exchange are presumed to be free to exchange or not as they see fit. The very idea of capitalist exchange means that commodities are not taken by force but are freely traded. This is also true of the exchange of labor time for wages. It is assumed that the worker or the employer is free to enter into the exchange and free to terminate it. Marx (1857–1858/1974:245) concluded that “equality and freedom are not only respected in exchange which is based on exchange values, but the exchange of exchange values is the real productive basis of all equality and freedom.” Nevertheless, Marx believed that capitalist practices result in an inverted view of freedom. It seems that we are free, but, in fact, it is capital that is free and we who are enslaved.

According to Marx, freedom is the ability to have control over your own labor and its products. Although individuals may seem free under capitalism, they are not. Under previous social forms, people were directly dominated by others and so were aware of their unfreedom. Under capitalism, people are dominated by capitalist relations that seem objective and natural and therefore are not perceived as a form of domination. Marx (1857–1858/1974:652) decried “the insipidity of the view that free competition is the ultimate development of human freedom …. This kind of individual freedom is therefore at the same time the most complete suspension of all individual freedom, and the most complete subjugation of individuality under social conditions which assume the form of objective powers.”

Because the capitalist owns the means of production, the exchange of wages for labor time cannot be free. The proletariat must work in order to live, but the capitalist has the choice to hire others from the reserve army of
labor, or to mechanize, or to let the factory sit idle until the workers become desperate enough to “freely” accept the capitalist’s wages. The worker is neither free nor equal to the capitalist.

Hence, the first level of the ideology of freedom and equality emerges from the practices of exchange in capitalism, but our ideas are inverted and do not represent real freedom and equality. It is capital that is freely and equally exchanged; it is capital that is accepted without prejudice; it is capital that is able to do as it wishes, not us. This first type of ideology is easily disrupted, and our awareness of this disruption drives capitalism to the next phase. Despite the ideology of equality and freedom, few workers feel equal to their employers; few feel free in their jobs. This is why the second type of ideology is necessary. These disruptions somehow must be explained away or made to look inevitable.

This is especially true with the ideology of equality and freedom, because these ideas are among the most threatening to capitalism. They are another example of how capitalism creates its own gravediggers. Older forms of unfreedom and inequality were clearly tied to people, and there was hope, therefore, of becoming free and equal by changing the hearts of the people who oppressed us. When we become aware of the source of unfreedom and inequality under capitalism, we begin to realize that capitalism itself must be changed. Ideologies therefore must be created to protect the capitalist system, and one way in which they do this is by portraying inequality as equality and unfreedom as freedom.

Marx believed that the capitalist system is inherently unequal. The capitalists automatically benefit more from the capitalist system, while the workers are automatically disadvantaged. Under capitalism, those who own the means of production, those with capital, make money from their money. Under capitalism, capital begets more capital—that is, investments give a return—and Marx believed that this was derived from the exploitation of the workers. Not only are the workers automatically exploited, but they also bear the burden of unemployment as a result of technological changes, geographical shifts, and other economic dislocations, all of which benefit the capitalist. The rule of capitalism is reflected in the common saying that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. Constantly increasing inequality is built into the capitalist system.

Any attempt toward a more equal society must take into account this automatic propensity of the capitalist system to increased inequality. Nevertheless, attempts to make the capitalist system more equal often are portrayed as forms of inequality. From the Marxist viewpoint, these attempts would be the second form of ideology. For example, ideologues promote a “flat tax” that taxes the rich and the poor at the same rate. They argue that because the rate is the same for rich and poor, it is equal. They ignore the fact that a graduated tax rate may be just compensation for the built-in inequality of capitalism. They create an ideology by portraying the obvious inequalities of the capitalist system as inevitable or as being due to the laziness of the poor. In this way, inequality is portrayed as equality, and the freedom of the rich to keep the fruits of exploitation trumps the freedom of the workers.

We see in this example not only the two types of ideology but also another instance of how Marx thought that capitalism is a good thing. The ideas of freedom and equality emerge from capitalism itself, and it is these ideas that drive us toward the dissolution of capitalism, toward communism.
Religion

Marx also saw religion as an ideology. He famously referred to religion as the opiate of the people, but it is worthwhile to look at the entire quotation:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

(Marx, 1843/1970)

Marx believed that religion, like all ideology, reflects a truth but that this truth is inverted. Because people cannot see that their distress and oppression are produced by the capitalist system, their distress and oppression are given a religious form. Marx clearly expressed that he was not against religion per se, but against a system that requires the illusions of religion.

This religious form is vulnerable to disruption and therefore is always liable to become the basis of a revolutionary movement. Religious movements have often been in the forefront of opposition to capitalism (e.g., liberation theology). Nevertheless, Marx felt that religion is especially amenable to becoming the second form of ideology by portraying the injustice of capitalism as a test for the faithful and pushing any revolutionary change off into the afterlife. In this way, the cry of the oppressed is used to further oppression.
Marx’s Economics: A Case Study

This chapter is devoted to an analysis of Marx’s sociology, but of course he is far better known for his economics. Although we have touched on a number of aspects of Marx’s economics, we have not dealt with it in a coherent fashion. In this section, we look at Marx’s economics, not as economics per se but rather as an exemplification of his sociological theory (Mazlish, 1984). There is much more to Marxian economics, but this is the most relevant way to deal with it in a book devoted to sociological theory.

A starting point for Marxian economics is in the concepts, previously touched on, of use value and exchange value. People have always created use values; that is, they have always produced things that directly satisfy their wants. A use value is defined qualitatively; that is, something either is or is not useful. An exchange value, however, is defined quantitatively, not qualitatively. It is defined by the amount of labor needed to appropriate useful qualities. Whereas use values are produced to satisfy one’s own needs, exchange values are produced to be exchanged for values of another use. Whereas the production of use values is a natural human expression, the existence of exchange values sets in motion a process by which humanity is distorted. The entire edifice of capitalism, including commodities, the market, money, and so forth, is erected on the basis of exchange values.

To Marx, the basic source of any value was the amount of socially necessary labor-time needed to produce an article under the normal conditions of production and with the average degree of skill and intensity of the time. This is the well-known labor theory of value. Although it is clear that labor lies at the base of use value, this fact grows progressively less clear as we move to exchange values, commodities, the market, and capitalism. To put it another way, “The determination of the magnitude of value by labor-time is therefore a secret, hidden under the apparent fluctuations in relative values of commodities” (Marx, 1867/1967:75). Labor, as the source of all value, is a secret in capitalism that allows the capitalists to exploit the workers.

According to Peter Worsley, Marx “put at the heart of his sociology—as no other sociology does—the theme of exploitation” (1982:115). The capitalists pay the workers less than the value the workers produce and keep the rest for themselves. The workers are not aware of this exploitation, and often, neither are the capitalists. The capitalists believe that this extra value is derived from their own cleverness, their capital investment, their manipulation of the market, and so on. Marx stated that “so long as trade is good, the capitalist is too much absorbed in money grubbing to take notice of this gratuitous gift of labor” (1867/1967:207). In sum, Marx said:

The capitalist does not know that the normal price of labor also includes a definite quantity of unpaid labor, and that this very unpaid labor is the normal source of his gain. The category, surplus labor-time, does not exist at all for him, since it is included in the normal working-day, which he thinks he has paid for in the day’s wages.

(Marx, 1867/1967:550)
This leads us to Marx’s central concept of *surplus value*. This is defined as the difference between the value of the product when it is sold and the value of the elements consumed in the formation of that product. Although means of production (raw materials and tools, the value of which comes from the labor involved in extracting or producing them) are consumed in the production process, it is labor that is the real source of surplus value.

The surplus derived from this process is used by the capitalists to pay for such things as rent to landowners and interest to banks. But the most important derivation from it is profit. The capitalists can use this profit for private consumption, but that would not lead to the expansion of capitalism. Rather, they expand their enterprise by converting it into a base for the creation of still more surplus value.

The desire for more profit and more surplus value for expansion pushes capitalism toward what Marx called the general law of capitalist accumulation. The capitalists seek to exploit workers as much as possible: “The constant tendency of capital is to force the cost of labor back towards … zero” (Marx, 1867/1967:600). Marx basically argued that the structure and the ethos of capitalism push the capitalists in the direction of the accumulation of more and more capital. In order to do this, given Marx’s view that labor is the source of value, the capitalists are led to intensify the exploitation of the proletariat. Ultimately, however, increased exploitation yields fewer and fewer gains; an upper limit of exploitation is reached. In addition, as this limit is approached, the government is forced by pressure from the working class to place restrictions on the actions of capitalists (e.g., laws limiting the length of the workday). As a result of these restrictions, the capitalists must look for other devices, and a major one is the substitution of machines for people. This substitution is made relatively easy, because the capitalists already have reduced the workers to laboring machines performing a series of simple operations. This shift to capital-intensive production is, paradoxically, a cause of the declining rate of profit because it is labor (not machines) that is the ultimate source of profit.

As mechanization proceeds, more and more people are put out of work and fall from the proletariat to the “industrial reserve army.” At the same time, heightening competition and the burgeoning costs of technology lead to a progressive decline in the number of capitalists. In the end, Marx foresaw a situation in which society would be characterized by a tiny number of exploitative capitalists and a huge mass of proletarians and members of the industrial reserve army. In these extreme circumstances, capitalism would be most vulnerable to revolution. As Marx put it, the expropriation of the masses by the capitalists would be replaced by “the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of people” (1867/1967:764). The capitalists, of course, seek to forestall their demise. For example, they sponsor colonial adventures with the objective of shifting at least some of the burden of exploitation from the home front to the colonies. However, in Marx’s view these efforts are ultimately doomed to failure, and the capitalists will face rebellion at home and abroad.

The key point about the general law of capitalist accumulation is the degree to which actors, both capitalist and proletarian, are impelled by the structure and ethos of capitalism to do what they do. Marx usually did not blame individual capitalists for their actions; he saw these actions as largely determined by the logic of the capitalist system. This is consistent with his view that actors in capitalism generally are devoid of creative independence. However, the developmental process inherent in capitalism provides the conditions necessary
for the ultimate reemergence of such creative action and, with it, the overthrow of the capitalist system.
Communism

Marx often wrote as though changes in the mode of production were inevitable, as in the quotation about the hand-mill giving you feudalism and the steam-mill giving you capitalism. Unless one wishes to find reasons for rejecting Marx’s theories, it is probably best to interpret Marx’s historical materialism as motivated by a desire to identify some predictable trends and to use these trends to discover the points where political action could be most effective. This is certainly the way that Marx used his theories in his concrete political and economic studies, such as *Class Struggles in France* (1850) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). The truth of historical materialism, then, does not depend on the inevitability of its historical predictions but rather on whether focusing on the way that we satisfy our material needs is the best way to reveal the opportunities for effective political intervention.

If the goal of Marx’s materialist view of history was to predict those points where political action could be most effective, then it is his view of what changes will lead to the next stage that is most important. Marx thought that capitalism had developed its productive powers so that it was ready to enter a new mode of production, which he called *communism*. Most of his analysis dwelled on conflicts in the present that would lead to this new economic form.
The Paris Commune: Historical Contexts

Historian John Merriman (2014:x) has described the events around the Paris Commune as “one of the most tragic, defining events of the nineteenth century.” In 1871, Marx watched from London as members of the Parisian political left took control of Paris and attempted to establish a socialist government, the Paris Commune, and then suffered terrible defeat. His International Working Men’s Association supported the Commune. He also wrote a pamphlet, The Civil War in France (1871/2001), which described the events and their significance for class revolt.

In the decade leading up to the Commune, Paris had been a prosperous, but divided, city. Ruled by Napoleon III, it exemplified the class divisions Marx and Engels had described in the Communist Manifesto. The bourgeoisie lived in luxury. The proletariat lived in poor, industrial neighborhoods (Merriman, 2014:x). Inequalities were exacerbated when Napoleon III was defeated in the Franco-Prussian war. In France, this led to the establishment of the Third Republic. This was a government that was headed by Adolphe Thiers and that served the interests of conservatives and monarchists rather than working people.

The immediate origins of the Commune can be traced to events that unfolded on March 18, 1871. In an attempt to consolidate power, Thiers sent the French army to seize cannons held in Paris by the National Guard, a force largely comprised of working-class Parisians. Together, the National Guard and Parisians repelled the army, forcing it, and the government, out of Paris and to the city of Versailles. For the moment, Paris was free of the Third Republic.

On March 26, elections were held and the Paris Commune was established. Although political views varied, most believed in the establishment of a “democratic and social Republic” (Merriman, 2014:37). Merriman (2014:63) described the aspirations of those on the far left of the Commune:

The Proudhonists and Blanquists imagined that France, like Paris, would evolve into a federation of communes, becoming a free country just as Paris had for the moment become a free city (ville libre). Such echoes could be heard at the meeting of women in Trinity Church on May 12, when a speaker thundered, “The day of justice approaches with giant strides…. The workshops in which you are packed will belong to you; the tools that are put into your hands will be yours; the gain resulting from your efforts, from your troubles, and from the loss of your health will be shared among you. Proletarians, you will be reborn.”

In the early days of the Commune, life in the city was festive. The poor enjoyed neighborhoods previously reserved for the rich. Members from all classes greeted each other with “Ah! Citoyenne … Ah! Citoyen!” and sang revolutionary songs (Merriman, 2014:52). Newspapers, pamphlets and art proliferated. Communards worked to establish the foundations of a socialist society. Marx (1871/2001: 67) reported that during these weeks the city was “free from … acts of violence.”

But the aspirations of the Commune were never to be realized. On May 21, the French army began an assault to re-take Paris. Over the next week it fought its way back into the city, through Communard barricades, neighborhood by neighborhood. The assault was violent, bloody, and merciless. Soldiers executed Communards and suspected sympathizers (men, women and children) on the spot, leaving bodies in the streets. Prisoners were sent to death by firing squad. Merriman (2014:201) used the words of Communard Elie Reclus to describe the atmosphere:

Paris had been transformed into “a workshop, an immense workshop … but a workshop in which machine guns are at work, a workshop in which the work of destruction is accomplished on such a great scale…. It is a horrible cacophony, this infernal charivari of hatred and passion.”

On May 28, by the time the army had reclaimed the city, many thousands lay dead. Despite brutal defeat, Marx hailed this as just the beginning of international class revolt. He declared that the “working men’s Paris, with its Commune, will be for ever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society” (1871/2001:113).

Despite the importance to Marx of the future communist society, he spent surprisingly little time depicting what this world would be like. He refused to write “recipes for the kitchens of the future” (Marx, cited in T.
Ball, 1991:139). The era in which Marx wrote was filled with talk of revolutions and new forms of society—of communism, socialism, anarchy, and many more now forgotten. Charismatic political leaders appeared on the historical stage and stirred audiences with their speeches. Marx, however, was intellectually opposed to painting utopian visions of the future. To Marx, the most important task was the critical analysis of contemporary capitalist society. He believed that such criticism would help bring down capitalism and create the conditions for the rise of a new socialist world. There would be time to construct communist society once capitalism was overcome. In general, however, Marx believed that communism would involve making decisions about what is to be produced away from the reified economy that runs in the interests of the few capitalists and putting in its place some sort of social decision making that would allow the needs of the many to be taken into account.
Criticisms

Five problems in Marx's theory need to be discussed. The first is the problem of communism as it came to exist. The failure of communist societies and their turn to a more capitalistically oriented economy raise questions about the role of Marxian theory within sociology (Antonio, 2011; Aronson, 1995; Hudelson, 1993; Manuel, 1992). Marx's ideas seem to have been tried and to have failed. At one time, almost one-third of the world's population lived under states inspired by the ideas of Marx. Many of those formerly Marxist states have become capitalist, and even those (except perhaps for Cuba) that still claim to be Marxist manifest nothing but a highly bureaucratized form of capitalism.

Against this criticism, it could be argued that those states never truly followed Marxist precepts and that it is unfair for critics to blame Marx for every misuse of his theory. However, those making the criticism claim that Marx himself insisted that Marxist theory should not be split from its actually existing practice. As Alvin Gouldner (1970:3) wrote, “Having set out to change the world, rather than produce one more interpretation of it, Marxist theory must ultimately be weighed on the scales of history.”

The second problem is often referred to as the missing emancipatory subject. Critics say that although Marx's theory places the proletariat at the heart of the social change leading to communism, the proletariat has rarely assumed this leading position and often is among the groups that are most opposed to communism. This problem is compounded by the fact that intellectuals—for example, academic sociologists—have leapt into the gap left by the proletariat and substituted intellectual activity for class struggle. In addition, the intellectuals’ disappointment at the proletariat’s conservatism is transformed into a theory that emphasizes the role of ideology much more strongly than Marx did and that tends to see the “heroes” of the future revolution as manipulated dupes.

The third problem is the missing dimension of gender. One of the main points of Marx’s theory is that labor becomes a commodity under capitalism, yet it is a historical fact that the commodifying of labor has happened less to women than to men. To a large degree, men’s paid labor still depends on the unpaid labor of women, especially the all-important rearing of the next generation of workers. Derek Sayer (1991) pointed out that the missing dimension of gender not only leaves a hole in Marx’s analysis but also affects his primary argument that capitalism is defined by its growing dependence on wage labor, because the growth of wage labor has been dependent on the unpaid labor of women. Patriarchy may be an essential foundation for the emergence of capitalism, but Marx simply ignored it.

The fourth problem is that Marx saw the economy as driven almost solely by production, and he ignored the role of consumption. The focus on production led him to predict that concerns for efficiency and cost cutting would lead to proletarianization, increasing alienation, and deepening class conflict. It could be argued, however, that the central role of consumption in the contemporary economy encourages some creativity and entrepreneurship and that these provide at least some wage labor jobs that are not alienating. People who create new video games or direct movies or perform popular music are less alienated from their work, even though they are firmly entrenched in a capitalist system. Although there are only a few such jobs, their
existence gives hope to the alienated masses, who can anticipate that they, or at least their children, might someday work in interesting and creative jobs.

Finally, some might point to Marx’s uncritical acceptance of Western conceptions of progress as a problem. Marx believed that the engine of history is humanity’s always improving exploitation of nature for its material needs. In addition, Marx thought that the essence of human nature is our ability to shape nature to our purposes. It may be that these assumptions are a root cause of many of our current and future ecological crises.
Contemporary Applications

Marx’s impact on academic scholarship and research has been massive. A full review cannot be provided in a chapter such as this one, but we present some highlights. In broadest terms his ideas have impacted political theory (Lenin, 1972), cultural theory (Adorno, 1966/1973; Gramsci, 1971; Lukács, 1922/1968), economic sociology (Baran and Sweezy, 1966), spatial theory (Lefebvre, 1974/1991), and globalization theory (Wallerstein, 1974). In addition, Robert Antonio (2011) provides a list of some of the substantive topics that have been studied using Marx’s theories: democracy and civil society, the media, the transnational class system, global political trends, violence, financial and ecological crises, among others. In the present moment, Marx’s theories are being used quite actively to address pressing social problems: growing inequality, the economic crisis of 2008, and ecological crisis.

For example, in 2013 economist Thomas Piketty published Capital in the Twenty-First Century. This book was number one on the New York Times best-seller list and was reviewed, positively, by major popular magazines such as The Economist. Though Piketty has denied the connection (Harvey, 2014), given the title it is hard to avoid making comparisons to Marx’s Capital. Piketty is certainly not a Marxist. According to David Harvey (2014), Piketty misunderstands the basic mechanisms of capitalism. For example, he treats capital as a thing rather than a social process. This said, Piketty shares with Marx a focus on the distribution of wealth in capitalist society. The central argument of the book, which echoes Marx’s main theoretical point, is that capitalism is beset with structural contradictions (though not the same contradictions described by Marx). These contradictions inevitably lead to increasing wealth inequality. Indeed the most important contribution of Piketty’s Capital is that it provides long-term empirical economic data, and therefore strong support, for an argument that Marxists have been making since the nineteenth century: inequality is a growing and endemic feature of capitalism.

Whereas Piketty lacks a Marxist theoretical foundation, recent analyses of the 2008 economic crisis demonstrate the continuing relevance of Marxist theory. In their edited volume Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown, Craig Calhoun and Georgi Derluguian (2011) arranged several essays that use Marx to understand the origins of the Great Recession. By these accounts, the problems of 2008 will not be overcome through the self-correcting features of the capitalist market or the development of new government policy. Rather, the crisis is just the most recent in a cycle of crises, all of which point to the ever-deepening contradictions of capitalism. To reproduce itself, capitalism, Harvey (2011:90) argued, needs to “find a path to a minimum compound 3-percent growth forever.” In other words, to survive, capitalism must grow endlessly. However, capitalism faces increasing limits to growth. Immanuel Wallerstein (2011a:80) said there are three kinds of limits: the growing costs of personnel, the costs of inputs, and the costs of taxation. In other words, over time it becomes so costly for capitalism to do business that the system must become unsustainable. Wallerstein argued that the crises are reaching the point where they can no longer be overcome. Hence, he predicts an end to the capitalist system in the near future.

Finally, some have discussed Marx’s potential contribution to the analysis of environmental problems. For example, John B. Foster (2015) argued that Marx’s writings contain an important, but long ignored,
environmental theory. In the 1850s, Marx developed the concept of “social metabolism” (Foster 2015:2). This concept, Foster said, played a central role in Marx’s later economic theory. It describes the relationship between humans and nature: “man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (Marx, cited in Foster, 2015:2). Ideally, humans are able to balance this relationship with nature. However, capitalism, with its drive for endless accumulation, wrecks the balance. It creates a “metabolic rift” between humans and nature. Extending these ideas to the present moment, Foster (2015:9) said that after centuries of capitalist accumulation, we now face a “global ecological rift.” The metabolism of the entire planet is at risk. The only way that we will overcome this rift is to shift humanity away from the values of endless accumulation to those of economic equality and sustainability. Relying on the Marxist concept of dialectic, Foster (2015:11) argued that even if we remain ideologically blind to the dangers, the shift will be “inevitably” propelled by the emergence of an “environmental proletariat.” Those most hard hit by economic and environmental hardship will rise up to demand an end to capitalism or any future economic system that disturbs the social metabolism.
Summary

Marx presented a complex and still relevant analysis of the historical basis of inequality in capitalism and how to change it. Marx’s theories are open to many interpretations, but this chapter tries to present an interpretation that makes his theories consistent with his actual historical studies.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the dialectical approach that Marx derived from Hegel and that shapes all of Marx’s work. The important point here is that Marx believed that society is structured around contradictions that can be resolved only through actual social change. One of the primary contradictions that Marx looked at was between human potential (nature) and the conditions for labor in capitalism. For Marx, human nature is intimately tied to labor, which both expresses and transforms human potential. Under capitalism, our labor is sold as a commodity, and the commodifying of our labor leads to alienation from our productive activity, from the objects that we make, from our fellow workers, and even from ourselves.

Next, the chapter presents Marx’s analysis of capitalist society. We begin with the central concept of commodities and then look at the contradiction between their use value and their exchange value. In capitalism, the exchange value of commodities tends to predominate over their actual usefulness in satisfying human needs; therefore, commodities begin to appear to be separate from human labor and from human need and eventually appear to have power over humans. Marx called this the fetishism of commodities. This fetishism is a form of reification, and it affects more than just commodities; in particular, it affects the economic system, which begins to seem like an objective, nonpolitical force that determines our lives. Because of this reification, we don’t see that the very idea of capital contains a contradictory social relation between those who profit from their investments and those whose actual labor provides the surplus value that constitutes profit. In other words, the ability of capital to generate profit rests on the exploitation of the proletariat. This underlying contradiction leads to class conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, which eventually will result in revolution because proletarianization will swell the ranks of the proletariat. This section concludes by stressing that despite his criticisms of capitalism, Marx believed that capitalism has been good and that his criticisms of it are from the perspective of its potential future.

Marx felt that he was able to take the view from capitalism’s potential future because of his materialist conception of history. By focusing on the forces of production, Marx was able to predict historical trends that allowed him to identify where political action could be effective. Political action and even revolution are necessary because relations of production and ideology hold back the necessary development of the forces of production. In Marx’s view these changes eventually will lead to a communist society.

We also offer a discussion of some of the most important nonmaterial (cultural) aspects of Marx’s theory—especially ideology and religion—as well as some of his famous ideas on economics, especially the labor theory of value.

The chapter ends with some criticisms of Marx’s theories. Despite their significance, these criticisms have contributed to the strength of the Marxist approach, even where the strengthening of some Marxist
approaches has meant abandoning some of Marx's most strongly held positions.
Notes

1. The approach here is based on the premise that there is no discontinuity or contradiction between Marx’s early work on human potential and his later work on the structures of capitalist society—that his early ideas continue, at least implicitly, in his later work even though these ideas were certainly modified by his study of the economic structures of capitalism.

2. In Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union, there was no problem about the “correct” interpretation of Marx. Stalin himself provided the interpretation and brutally eliminated all those, such as Leon Trotsky, who disagreed.

3. Marx did, however, occasionally discuss the inevitability of socialism.

4. Although Marx acknowledged that class conflict often is affected by other forms of stratification (e.g., ethnic, racial, gender, and religious), he did not accept that these could be primary.

5. Although Marx’s theoretical work looked mainly at these two classes, his historical studies examined a number of different class formations. Most significant are the petty bourgeoisie—small shopkeepers employing at most a few workers—and the lumpenproletariat—the proletariat who readily sell out to the capitalists. For Marx, these other classes can be understood only in terms of the primary relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

6. Marx might be seen as an exception to his own theory. He did acknowledge that it is possible for some individuals among the bourgeoisie to lay aside their class characteristics and adopt a communist consciousness (Marx and Engels, 1845–1846/1970:69).

7. Antonio (2011:119–120) distinguishes between a hard and a soft material determinism. “Although hard determinist passages exist in Marx’s texts, he suggested much more often a complex, historically contingent materialism, which ought not to be reduced to ‘technological determinism’ (i.e., social change arises from technical change) or to ‘reflection theory’ (i.e., ideas are mere emanations of material reality).”

8. One way of looking at Marx’s economic theory (e.g., the labor theory of value) is as a specific application of his more general sociological theory. This stands in contrast to G. A. Cohen’s (1978) work, in which his overriding concern is the underlying economic theory in Marx’s work. Although Cohen sees the “economic” and the “social” as being interchangeable in Marx’s work, he clearly implies that Marx’s economic theory is the more general.
7 Emile Durkheim
Chapter Outline

Introduction
Social Facts
The Division of Labor in Society
Suicide
The Elementary Forms of Religious Life
Moral Education and Social Reform
Criticisms
Contemporary Applications
Introduction

There are two main themes in the work of Emile Durkheim. The first is the priority of the social over the individual, and the second is the idea that society can be studied scientifically. Because both of these themes continue to be controversial, Durkheim is still relevant today.

We live in a society that tends to see everything as attributable to individuals, even clearly social problems such as racism, pollution, and economic recessions. Durkheim approaches things from the opposite perspective, stressing the social dimension of all human phenomena. However, even some who recognize the importance of society tend to see it as an amorphous entity that can be intuitively understood but never scientifically studied. Here again, Durkheim provides the opposing approach. For Durkheim, society is made up of "social facts," which exceed our intuitive understanding and must be investigated through observations and measurements. These ideas are so central to sociology that Durkheim is often seen as the “father” of sociology (Gouldner, 1958; Tiryakian, 2009). To found sociology as a discipline was indeed one of Durkheim’s primary goals.

Durkheim (1900/1973b:3) believed that sociology, as an idea, was born in France in the nineteenth century. He wanted to turn this idea into a discipline, a well-defined field of study. He recognized the roots of sociology in the ancient philosophers—such as Plato and Aristotle—and more proximate sources in French philosophers such as Montesquieu and Condorcet. However, in Durkheim’s (1900/1973b:6) view, previous philosophers did not go far enough because they did not try to create an entirely new discipline.

Although the term sociology had been coined some years earlier by Auguste Comte, there was no field of sociology per se in late nineteenth-century universities. There were no schools, departments, or even professors of sociology. There were a few thinkers who were dealing with ideas that were in one way or another sociological, but there was as yet no disciplinary “home” for sociology. Indeed, there was strong opposition from existing disciplines to the founding of such a field. The most significant opposition came from psychology and philosophy, two fields that claimed already to cover the domain sought by sociology. The dilemma for Durkheim, given his aspirations for sociology, was how to create for it a separate and identifiable niche.

To separate it from psychology, Durkheim argued that sociology should be concerned with the study of social facts, phenomena irreducible to individual psychology. Even within French academic circles, this approach proved controversial and was challenged by key figures such as Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904). Durkheim’s collaborator Célestin Bouglé referred to the debate between Tarde and Durkheim as the “famous duel”: should sociology focus on the individual or the collective? (Fournier, 2007/2013:60) In contrast to Durkheim’s social realism, which took as its starting point the autonomous reality of society, Tarde (1903) argued that society is made up of the imitative relations between individuals. In other words, there are no shared beliefs, values, and social structures that, in themselves, direct human action. Rather, beliefs and values are transmitted (and therefore shared) when individuals imitate one another. According to this view, sociology should study the psychological basis of imitation rather than society in itself. Durkheim criticized this
perspective as speculative and based in imaginative ideas rather than a rigorous scientific study of society (see Fournier, 2007/2013:344). Despite a recent interest in Tarde’s version of sociology (Candea, 2010; Latour, 2007), Durkheim’s social realism won the day and shaped the course of the discipline.

To separate sociology from philosophy, Durkheim argued that it should be oriented toward empirical research. This seems simple enough, but the situation was complicated by Durkheim’s belief that sociology was also threatened by a philosophical school within sociology itself. In his view, the two other major figures of the epoch who thought of themselves as sociologists, Comte and Herbert Spencer, were far more interested in philosophizing, in abstract theorizing, than they were in studying the social world empirically. If the field continued in the direction set by Comte and Spencer, Durkheim felt, it would become nothing more than a branch of philosophy. As a result, he found it necessary to attack both Comte and Spencer (Durkheim, 1895/1982:19–20) for relying on preconceived ideas of social phenomena instead of actually studying the real world. Thus, Comte was said to be guilty of assuming theoretically that the social world was evolving in the direction of an increasingly perfect society, rather than engaging in the hard, rigorous, and basic work of actually studying the changing nature of various societies. Similarly, Spencer was accused of assuming harmony in society rather than studying whether harmony actually existed.
Social Facts

To help sociology move away from psychology and philosophy and to give it a clear and separate identity, Durkheim (1895/1982) proposed that the distinctive subject matter of sociology should be the study of social facts (see M. Gane, 1988; Gilbert, 1994; Nielsen, 2005, 2007; and the special edition of Sociological Perspectives, 1995). Briefly, social facts are the social structures and cultural norms and values that are external to, and coercive of, actors. Students, for example, are constrained by such social structures as the university bureaucracy as well as the norms and values of American society, which place great importance on a college education. Similar social facts constrain people in all areas of social life.
Emile Durkheim was born on April 15, 1858, in Epinal, France. He was descended from a long line of rabbis and studied to be a rabbi, but by the time he was in his teens, he had largely disavowed his heritage (Strenski, 1997:4). From that time on, his lifelong interest in religion was more academic than theological (Meštrovic’, 1988). He was dissatisfied not only with his religious training but also with his general education and its emphasis on literary and aesthetic matters. He longed for schooling in scientific methods and in the moral principles needed to guide social life. He rejected a traditional academic career in philosophy and sought instead to acquire the scientific training needed to contribute to the moral guidance of society. Although he was interested in scientific sociology, there was no field of sociology at that time, so between 1882 and 1887 he taught philosophy in a number of provincial schools in the Paris area.

His appetite for science was whetted further by a trip to Germany, where he was exposed to the scientific psychology being pioneered by Wilhelm Wundt (Durkheim, 1887/1993). In the years immediately after his visit to Germany, Durkheim published a good deal, basing his work, in part, on his experiences there (R. Jones, 1994). These publications helped him gain a position in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bordeaux in 1887.

In his role at Bordeaux he offered public lectures on the social sciences and covered topics such as social solidarity, the family, suicide, crime, and religion. These were the first courses in social science offered at a French university. His main responsibility, however, was teaching courses in education to schoolteachers, with a focus on moral education. Durkheim saw himself not merely as an educator and "scholar but also as a citizen" (Fournier, 2007/2013:117). As a result, his lectures had a "practical character" that would address the problems encountered in everyday work. Durkheim was admired for his teaching which was described as original, systematic and "strikingly powerful." He was listened to with a "sort of fervor" that exercised a "considerable influence" on his students and at times concerned university administration (Watz, cited in Fournier, 2007/2013:348).
The years that followed were characterized by a series of personal successes for Durkheim. In 1893 he publicly defended his Latin thesis on Montesquieu and his French doctoral thesis, which was soon thereafter published as *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, 1892/1997; Fournier, 2007/2013). There was some resistance to the work, which was described as moralistic and deterministic. Some of the examiners were wary of Durkheim’s focus on sociology because it was “too closely related to socialism” (Perreur, cited in Fournier, 2007/2013:153). Nevertheless, the defense was regarded as a great success: “one of the most remarkable of oral examinations, and one of the most completely satisfying” (Fournier, 2007/2013:155). His major methodological statement, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, appeared in 1895, followed (in 1897) by his empirical application of those methods in the study *Suicide*. These works increased Durkheim’s reputation as one of the major figures in the developing field of sociology, but they were challenged, again, by his competitors, who criticized Durkheim’s method and were troubled by his rejection of psychological accounts of social life. By 1896 he had become a full professor at Bordeaux. In 1902 he was summoned to the famous French university the Sorbonne, and in 1906 he was named Professor of the Science of Education, a title that was changed in 1913 to Professor of the Science of Education and Sociology. The other of his most famous works, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, was published in 1912.

Durkheim, as we learn throughout this book, had a profound influence on the development of sociology, but his influence was not restricted to it (Halls, 1996). Much of his impact on other fields came through the journal *L’Année sociologique*, which he founded in 1898. Although the journal contained original articles (including a piece by Georg Simmel in the first issue), it was largely a collection of book reviews and bibliographic materials. Its purpose was to “fight the still widespread conception according to which sociology is a branch of philosophy” and to counter the “popular sociology of the day” (Heilbron, 2015:82–83).

Although Durkheim, the editor, clearly took on the bulk of the work, especially in the early issues of the journal, this was a collaborative enterprise drawing together scholars trained in philosophy but committed to the development of a rigorous scientific sociology. Durkheim used the *L’Année sociologique* to build a team of like-minded scholars, a task crucial to the development of scientific sociology. Prominent figures included Célestin Bouglé, Gaston Richard, François Simiand, Henri Hubert, and Durkheim’s nephew Marcel Mauss. The work was hard, occupying at least four to five months per year. The focus on book reviews and bibliography, although important, frustrated Durkheim because it took away from the equally important task of getting on with doing original sociological work. Durkheim was concerned about not only his own time but also that of his younger collaborators: “I feel responsible for all that, and that causes me a lot of pain. I cannot tell you how painful I find it” (Fournier, 2007/2013:376).

Alongside his nephew Marcel Mauss, one of Durkheim’s most promising collaborators and students was his own son, André Durkheim, who had trained as a linguist. André, however, was sent to the front lines of World War I and died from wounds on December 17, 1915. Durkheim attempted to remain strong and continue his work, but he died just two years later, on November 15, 1917. Many remarked that his death was caused by the loss of André. Mauss wrote, “The death [of André] affected him both as a father and as an intellectual; it was this that brought about the death of Durkheim” (cited in Fournier, 2007/2013:722). Although Durkheim was a celebrated figure in French intellectual circles at the time, it was not until more than twenty years later, with the publication of Talcott Parsons’s *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), that his work became a significant influence on American sociology.

Crucial in separating sociology from psychology and philosophy is the idea that social facts are to be treated as “things” (S. Jones, 1996) and studied empirically. This means that we must study social facts by acquiring data from outside of our own minds through observation and experimentation. The empirical study of social facts as things sets Durkheimian sociology apart from more philosophical approaches.1

A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.

(Durkheim, 1895/1982:13)
Note that Durkheim gave two ways of defining a social fact so that sociology is distinguished from psychology. First, a social fact is experienced as an external constraint rather than an internal drive; second, it is general throughout the society and is not attached to any particular individual.

Durkheim argued that social facts cannot be reduced to individuals, but must be studied as their own reality. Durkheim referred to social facts with the Latin term *sui generis*, which means “unique.” He used this term to claim that social facts have their own unique character that is not reducible to individual consciousness. To allow that social facts could be explained by reference to individuals would be to reduce sociology to psychology. Instead, social facts can be explained only by other social facts. For example, Durkheim explained the division of labor and even the rate of suicide with other social facts rather than individual intentions. To summarize, social facts can be empirically studied, are external to the individual, are coercive of the individual, and are explained by other social facts.

Durkheim gave several examples of social facts, including legal rules, moral obligations, and social conventions. He also referred to language as a social fact, and it provides an easily understood example. First, language is a “thing” that must be studied empirically. One cannot simply philosophize about the logical rules of language. Certainly, all languages have some logical rules regarding grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and so forth; however, all languages also have important exceptions to these logical rules (Quine, 1972). What follows the rules and what are exceptions must be discovered empirically by studying actual language use, especially because language use changes over time in ways that are not completely predictable.

Second, language is external to the individual. Although individuals use a language, language is not defined or created by the individual. The fact that individuals adapt language to their own use indicates that language is first external to the individual and in need of adaptation for individual use. Indeed, some philosophers (Kripke, 1982; Wittgenstein, 1953) have argued that there cannot be such a thing as a private language. A collection of words with only private meanings would not qualify as a language because it cannot perform the basic function of a language, that is, communication. Language is, by definition, social and therefore external to any particular individual.

Third, language is coercive of the individual. The language that we use makes some things extremely difficult to say. For example, people in lifelong relationships with same-sex partners have a very difficult time referring to each other. Should they call each other “partners”—leading people into thinking they are in business together—“significant others,” “lovers,” “spouses,” “special friends”? Each seems to have its disadvantages. Language is part of the system of social facts that makes life with a same-sex partner difficult.

Finally, changes in language can be explained only by other social facts and never by one individual’s intentions. Even in those rare instances where a change in language can be traced to an individual, the actual explanation for the change is the social facts that have made society open to this change. For example, the most changeable part of language is slang, which almost always originates in a marginal social group. We may assume that an individual first originates a slang term, but which individual is irrelevant. It is the fact of the marginal social group that truly explains the history and function of the slang.
Some sociologists feel that Durkheim took an “extremist” position (Karady, 1983:79–80) in limiting sociology to the study of social facts. This position has limited at least some branches of sociology to the present day. Furthermore, Durkheim seemed to artificially sever sociology from neighboring fields. As Charles Lemert (1994:91) put it, “Because he defined sociology so exclusively in relation to its own facts, Durkheim cut it off from the other sciences of man.” Nevertheless, whatever its subsequent drawbacks, Durkheim’s idea of social facts both established sociology as an independent field of study and provided one of the most convincing arguments for studying society as it is instead of what it should be.

Material and Nonmaterial Social Facts

Durkheim differentiated between two broad types of social facts—material and nonmaterial. Material social facts, such as styles of architecture, forms of technology, and legal codes, are the easier to understand of the two because they are directly observable. Clearly, such things as laws are external to individuals and coercive over them. More importantly, these material social facts often express a far larger and more powerful realm of moral forces that are at least equally external to individuals and coercive over them; these are nonmaterial social facts.

The bulk of Durkheim’s studies, and the heart of his sociology, lies in the study of nonmaterial social facts. Durkheim said, “Not all social consciousness achieves … externalization and materialization” (1897/1951:315). What sociologists now call norms and values, or more generally culture (J. Alexander, 1988b), are good examples of what Durkheim meant by nonmaterial social facts. But this idea creates a problem: How can nonmaterial social facts like norms and values be external to the actor? Where could they be found except in the minds of actors? And if they are in the minds of actors, are they not internal rather than external?

Durkheim recognized that nonmaterial social facts are, to a certain extent, found in the minds of individuals. However, it was his belief that when people begin to interact in complex ways, their interactions will “obey laws all their own” (Durkheim, 1912/1965:471). Individuals are still necessary as a kind of substrate for the nonmaterial social facts, but the particular form and content will be determined by the complex interactions and not by the individuals. Hence, Durkheim could write in the same work first that “social things are actualized only through men; they are the product of human activity” (1895/1982:17) and second that “society is not a mere sum of individuals” (103). Despite the fact that society is made up only of human beings and contains no immaterial “spiritual” substance, it can be understood only through studying the interactions rather than the individuals. The interactions, even when nonmaterial, have their own levels of reality. This has been called relational realism (Alpert, 1939).

Durkheim saw social facts along a continuum of materiality (Lukes, 1972:9–10). The sociologist usually begins a study by focusing on material social facts, which are empirically accessible, in order to understand nonmaterial social facts, which are the real focus of his work. The most material are such things as population size and density, channels of communication, and housing arrangements (Andrews, 1993). Durkheim called these facts morphological, and they figure most importantly in his first book, The Division of Labor in Society (1893/1964). At another level are structural components (a bureaucracy, e.g.), which are a mixture of
morphological components (the density of people in a building and their lines of communication) and nonmaterial social facts (such as the bureaucratic norms).

Types of Nonmaterial Social Facts

Because nonmaterial social facts are so important to understanding Durkheim, we examine four different types—morality, collective conscience, collective representations, and social currents—before considering how Durkheim used these types in his studies.

Morality

Durkheim was a sociologist of morality in the broadest sense of the word (R. Hall, 1987; Meštrović’, 1988; Varga, 2006). Studying him reminds us that a concern with morality was at the foundation of sociology as a discipline. Durkheim’s view of morality had two aspects. First, Durkheim was convinced that morality is a social fact, in other words, that morality can be empirically studied, is external to the individual, is coercive of the individual, and is explained by other social facts. This means that morality is not something that one can philosophize about, but rather something that one has to study as an empirical phenomenon. This is particularly true because morality is intimately related to the social structure. To understand the morality of any particular institution, you have to first study how the institution is constituted, how it came to assume its present form, what its place is in the overall structure of society, how the various institutional obligations are related to the social good, and so forth.

Second, Durkheim was a sociologist of morality because his studies were driven by his concern about the moral “health” of modern society. Much of Durkheim’s sociology can be seen as a by-product of his concern with moral issues. Indeed, one of Durkheim’s associates wrote in a review of his life’s work that “one will fail to understand his works if one does not take account of the fact that morality was their center and object” (Davy, trans. in R. Hall, 1987:5).

This second point needs more explanation if we are to understand Durkheim’s perspective. It was not that Durkheim thought that society had become, or was in danger of becoming, immoral. That was simply impossible because morality was, for Durkheim (1925/1961:59), identified with society. Therefore, society could not be immoral, but it could certainly lose its moral force if the collective interest of society became nothing but the sum of self-interests. Only to the extent that morality was a social fact could it impose an obligation on individuals that superseded their self-interest. Consequently, Durkheim believed that society needs a strong common morality. What the morality should be was of less interest to him.

Durkheim’s great concern with morality was related to his curious definition of freedom. In Durkheim’s view, people were in danger of a “pathological” loosening of moral bonds. These moral bonds were important to Durkheim, for without them the individual would be enslaved by ever-expanding and insatiable passions. People would be impelled by their passions into a mad search for gratification, but each new gratification would lead only to more and more needs. According to Durkheim, the one thing that every human will always want is “more.” And, of course, that is the one thing we ultimately cannot have. If society does not limit us, we will become slaves to the pursuit of more. Consequently, Durkheim held the seemingly paradoxical view
that the individual needs morality and external control in order to be free. This view of the insatiable desire at the core of every human is central to his sociology.

**Collective Conscience**

Durkheim attempted to deal with his interest in common morality in various ways and with different concepts. In his early efforts to deal with this issue, Durkheim developed the idea of the collective conscience. In French, the word conscience means both “consciousness” and “moral conscience.” Durkheim characterized the collective conscience in the following way:

> The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the collective or common conscience…. It is, thus, an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them.

(Durkheim, 1893/1964:79–80)

Several points are worth underscoring in this definition. First, it is clear that Durkheim thought of the collective conscience as occurring throughout a given society when he wrote of the “totality” of people’s beliefs and sentiments. Second, Durkheim clearly conceived of the collective conscience as being independent and capable of determining other social facts. It is not just a reflection of a material base as Marx sometimes suggested. Finally, although he held such views of the collective conscience, Durkheim also wrote of its being “realized” through individual consciousness.

Collective conscience refers to the general structure of shared understandings, norms, and beliefs. It is therefore an all-embracing and amorphous concept. Durkheim employed this concept to argue that “primitive” societies had a stronger collective conscience (i.e., more shared understandings, norms, and beliefs) than did modern societies.

**Collective Representations**

Because collective conscience is such a broad and amorphous idea, it is impossible to study directly and must be approached through related material social facts (e.g., we will look at Durkheim’s use of the legal system to say something about the collective conscience). Durkheim’s dissatisfaction with this limitation led him to use the collective conscience less in his later work in favor of the much more specific concept of collective representations (Nemedi, 1995; Schmaus, 1994). The French word représentation literally means “idea.” Durkheim used the term to refer to both a collective concept and a social “force.” Examples of collective representations are religious symbols, myths, and popular legends. All of these are ways in which society reflects on itself (Durkheim, 1895/1982:40). They represent collective beliefs, norms, and values, and they motivate us to conform to these collective claims.

Collective representations also cannot be reduced to individuals because they emerge out of social interactions, but they can be studied more directly than collective conscience because they are more likely to be connected
to material symbols such as flags, icons, and pictures or connected to practices such as rituals. Therefore, the sociologist can begin to study how certain collective representations fit well together, or have an affinity, whereas others do not. As an example, we can look at a sociological study that shows how representations of Abraham Lincoln have changed in response to other social facts.

Between the turn of the century and 1945, Lincoln, like other heroic presidents, was idealized. Prints showed him holding Theodore Roosevelt’s hand and pointing him in the right direction, or hovering in ethereal splendor behind Woodrow Wilson as he contemplated matters of war and peace, or placing his reassuring hand on Franklin Roosevelt’s shoulder. Cartoons showed admirers looking up to his statue or portrait. Neoclassical statues depicted him larger than life; state portraits enveloped him in the majesty of presidential power; “grand style” history painting showed him altering the fate of the nation. By the 1960s, however, traditional pictures had disappeared and been replaced by a new kind of representation on billboards, posters, cartoons, and magazine covers. Here Lincoln is shown wearing a party hat and blowing a whistle to mark a bank’s anniversary; there he is playing a saxophone to announce a rock concert; elsewhere he is depicted arm in arm with a seductive Marilyn Monroe, or sitting upon his Lincoln Memorial chair of state grasping a can of beer, or wearing sunglasses and looking “cool,” or exchanging Valentine cards with George Washington to signify that Valentine’s Day had displaced their own traditional birthday celebrations. Post-1960s commemorative iconography articulates the diminishing of Lincoln’s dignity.

(B. Schwartz, 1998:73)

Abraham Lincoln functions in American society as a collective representation in that his various representations allow a people to think about themselves as Americans—as either American patriots or American consumers. His image is also a force that motivates Americans to perform a patriotic duty or to buy a greeting card. A study of this representation allows us to better understand changes in American society.

Social Currents

Most of the examples of social facts that Durkheim referred to are associated with social organizations. However, he made it clear that there are social facts “which do not present themselves in this already crystallized form” (1895/1982:52). Durkheim called these facts social currents. He gave as examples “the great waves of enthusiasm, indignation, and pity” that are produced in public gatherings (52–53). Although social currents are less concrete than other social facts, they are nevertheless social facts because they cannot be reduced to the individual. We are swept along by such social currents, and this has a coercive power over us even if we become aware of it only when we struggle against the common feelings.

It is possible for these nonmaterial and ephemeral social facts to affect even the strongest institutions. For example, Sabrina Ramet (1991) reported that the social currents that are potentially created among a crowd at a rock concert were viewed as a threat by Eastern European communist governments and, indeed, contributed to their downfall. Rock concerts were places for the emergence and dissemination of “cultural standards,
fashions, and behavioral syndromes independent of party control” (Ramet, 1991:216). In particular, members
of the audience were likely to see an expression of their alienation in the concert. Their own feelings were
thereby affirmed, strengthened, and given new social and political meanings. In other words, political leaders
were afraid of rock concerts because of the potential for the depressing individual feelings of alienation to be
transformed into the motivating social fact of alienation. This provides another example of how social facts are
related to but different from individual feelings and intentions.

Given the emphasis on norms, values, and culture in contemporary sociology, we have little difficulty
accepting Durkheim’s interest in nonmaterial social facts. However, the concept of social currents does cause a
few problems. Particularly troublesome is the idea of a set of independent social currents “coursing” through
the social world as if they were somehow suspended in a social void. This problem has led many to criticize
Durkheim for having a group–mind orientation (Pope, 1976:192–194). (Such an idea was prevalent in the late
1800s and early 1900s, especially in the work of Franklin H. Giddings [Chriss, 2006].) Those who accuse
Durkheim of having such a perspective argue that he accorded nonmaterial social facts an autonomous
existence, separate from actors. But cultural phenomena cannot float by themselves in a social void, and
Durkheim was well aware of this.

But how are we to conceive of this social consciousness? Is it a simple and transcendent being, soaring
above society? … It is certain that experience shows us nothing of the sort. The collective mind [l’esprit
collectif] is only a composite of individual minds. But the latter are not mechanically juxtaposed and
closed off from one another. They are in perpetual interaction through the exchange of symbols; they
interpenetrate one another. They group themselves according to their natural affinities; they coordinate
and systematize themselves. In this way is formed an entirely new psychological being, one without equal
in the world. The consciousness with which it is endowed is infinitely more intense and more vast than
those which resonate within it. For it is “a consciousness of consciousnesses” [une conscience de consciences].
Within it, we find condensed at once all the vitality of the present and of the past.

(Durkheim, 1885/1978:103)

Social currents can be viewed as sets of meanings that are shared by the members of a collectivity. As such,
they cannot be explained in terms of the mind of any given individual. Individuals certainly contribute to
social currents, but by becoming social something new develops through their interactions. Social currents can
only be explained intersubjectively, that is, in terms of the interactions between individuals. They exist at the
level of interactions, not at the level of individuals. These collective “moods,” or social currents, vary from one
collectivity to another, with the result that there is variation in the rate of certain behaviors, including, as we
will see later in this chapter, something as seemingly individualistic as suicide.

In fact, there are very strong similarities between Durkheim’s theory of social facts and current theories about
the relation between the brain and the mind (Sawyer, 2002). Both theories use the idea that complex,
constantly changing systems will begin to display new properties that “cannot be predicted from a full and
complete description of the component units of the system” (Sawyer, 2002:228). Even though modern
philosophy assumes that the mind is nothing but brain functions, the argument is that the complexity of the
interconnections in the brain creates a new level of reality, the mind, that is not explainable in terms of
individual neurons. This was precisely Durkheim’s argument: that the complexity and intensity of interactions
between individuals cause a new level of reality to emerge that cannot be explained in terms of the individuals.
Hence, it could be argued that Durkheim had a very modern conception of nonmaterial social facts that
encompasses norms, values, culture, and a variety of shared social-psychological phenomena (Emirbayer,
1996).
The Division of Labor in Society

The Division of Labor in Society (Durkheim, 1893/1964; Gibbs, 2003) has been called sociology's first classic (Tiryakian, 1994). In this work, Durkheim traced the development of the modern relation between individuals and society. In particular, Durkheim wanted to use his new science of sociology to examine what many at the time had come to see as the modern crisis of morality. The preface to the first edition begins, “This book is above all an attempt to treat the facts of moral life according to the methods of the positive sciences” (Durkheim, 1893/1964).

In France in Durkheim’s day, there was a widespread feeling of moral crisis. The French Revolution had ushered in a focus on the rights of the individual that often expressed itself as an attack on traditional authority and religious beliefs. This trend continued even after the fall of the revolutionary government. By the mid-nineteenth century, many people felt that social order was threatened because people thought only about themselves and not about society. In the less than one hundred years between the French Revolution and Durkheim’s maturity, France went through three monarchies, two empires, and three republics. These regimes produced fourteen constitutions. The feeling of moral crisis was brought to a head by Prussia’s crushing defeat of France in 1870, which included the annexation of Durkheim’s birthplace by Prussia. This was followed by the short-lived and violent revolution known as the Paris Commune. Both the defeat and the subsequent revolt were blamed on the problem of rampant individualism.

Comte argued that many of these events could be traced to the increasing division of labor. In simpler societies, people do basically the same thing, such as farming, and they share common experiences and consequently have common values. In modern society, in contrast, everyone has a different job. When different people are assigned various specialized tasks, they no longer share common experiences. This diversity undermines the shared moral beliefs that are necessary for a society to function harmoniously. Consequently, people will not sacrifice in times of social need. Comte proposed that sociology create a new pseudo-religion that would reinstate social cohesion. To a large degree, The Division of Labor in Society can be seen as a refutation of Comte’s analysis (Gouldner, 1962). Durkheim argued that the division of labor does not represent the disappearance of social morality so much as a new kind of social morality.

The thesis of The Division of Labor is that modern society is not held together by the similarities between people who do basically similar things. Instead, it is the division of labor itself that pulls people together by forcing them to be dependent on each other. It may seem that the division of labor is an economic necessity that corrodes the feeling of solidarity, but Durkheim argued that “the economic services that it can render are insignificant compared with the moral effect that it produces and its true function is to create between two or more people a feeling of solidarity” (1893/1964:17).

Mechanical and Organic Solidarity

The change in the division of labor has had enormous implications for the structure of society. Durkheim was most interested in the changed way in which social solidarity is produced, in other words, the changed way in
which society is held together and how its members see themselves as part of a whole. To capture this difference, Durkheim referred to two types of solidarity—mechanical and organic. A society characterized by **mechanical solidarity** is unified because all people are generalists. The bond among people is that they are all engaged in similar activities and have similar responsibilities. In contrast, a society characterized by **organic solidarity** is held together by the differences among people, by the fact that all have different tasks and responsibilities.3

Because people in modern society perform a relatively narrow range of tasks, they need many other people in order to survive. The primitive family headed by father–hunter and mother–food gatherer is practically self-sufficient, but the modern family needs the grocer, baker, butcher, auto mechanic, teacher, police officer, and others. These people, in turn, need the kinds of services that others provide in order to live in the modern world. Modern society, in Durkheim’s view, is thus held together by the specialization of people and their need for the services of many others. This specialization includes not only that of individuals but also of groups, structures, and institutions.

Durkheim argued that primitive societies, compared to modern societies, have a stronger collective conscience, that is, a greater number of shared understandings, norms, and beliefs. The increasing division of labor has caused a diminution of the collective conscience. The collective conscience is of much less significance in a society with organic solidarity than it is in a society with mechanical solidarity. People in modern societies are more likely to be held together by the division of labor and the resulting need for the functions performed by others than they are by a shared and powerful collective conscience. Nevertheless, even organic societies have a collective consciousness, albeit in a weaker form that allows for more individual differences.

Anthony Giddens (1972) pointed out that the collective conscience in the two types of society can be differentiated on four dimensions—volume, intensity, rigidity, and content (see Table 7.1). **Volume** refers to the number of people enveloped by the collective conscience; **intensity**, to how deeply the individuals feel about it; **rigidity**, to how clearly it is defined; and **content**, to the form that the collective conscience takes in the two types of society. In a society characterized by mechanical solidarity, the collective conscience covers virtually the entire society and all its members; it is believed in with great intensity; it is extremely rigid; and its content is highly religious in character. In a society with organic solidarity, the collective conscience is limited to particular groups; it is adhered to with much less intensity; it is not very rigid; and its content is the elevation of the importance of the individual to a moral precept.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solidarity</th>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Rigidity</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical</td>
<td>Entire society</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>Particular groups</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moral individualism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dynamic Density**

The division of labor was a material social fact to Durkheim because it is a pattern of interactions in the social
world. As indicated earlier, social facts must be explained by other social facts. Durkheim believed that the cause of the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity was dynamic density. This concept refers to the number of people in a society and the amount of interaction that occurs among them. More people means an increase in the competition for scarce resources, and more interaction means a more intense struggle for survival among the basically similar components of society.

The problems associated with dynamic density usually are resolved through differentiation and, ultimately, the emergence of new forms of social organization. The rise of the division of labor allows people to complement, rather than conflict with, one another. Furthermore, the increased division of labor makes for greater efficiency, with the result that resources increase, making the competition over them more peaceful.

This points to one final difference between mechanical and organic solidarity. In societies with organic solidarity, less competition and more differentiation allow people to cooperate more and be supported by the same resource base. Therefore, difference allows for even closer bonds between people than does similarity. Thus, in a society characterized by organic solidarity, there are both more solidarity and more individuality than there are in a society characterized by mechanical solidarity (Rueschemeyer, 1994). Individuality, then, is not the opposite of close social bonds but a requirement for them (Müller, 1994).

Repressive and Restitutive Law

The division of labor and dynamic density are material social facts, but Durkheim’s main interest was in the forms of solidarity, which are nonmaterial social facts. Durkheim felt that it was difficult to study nonmaterial social facts directly, especially something as pervasive as a collective conscience. To study nonmaterial social facts scientifically, the sociologist should examine material social facts that reflect the nature of, and changes in, nonmaterial social facts. In The Division of Labor in Society, Durkheim chose to study the differences between law in societies with mechanical solidarity and law in societies with organic solidarity (R. Cotterrell, 1999).

Durkheim argued that a society with mechanical solidarity is characterized by repressive law. Because people are very similar in this type of society, and because they tend to believe very strongly in a common morality, any offense against their shared value system is likely to be of significance to most individuals. Because everyone feels the offense and believes deeply in the common morality, a wrongdoer is likely to be punished severely for any action that offends the collective moral system. Theft might lead to the cutting off of the offender’s hands; blaspheming might result in the removal of one’s tongue. Even minor offenses against the moral system are likely to be met with severe punishment.

In contrast, a society with organic solidarity is characterized by restitutive law, which requires offenders to make restitution for their crimes. In such societies, offenses are more likely to be seen as committed against a particular individual or segment of society than against the moral system itself. Because there is a weak common morality, most people do not react emotionally to a breach of the law. Instead of being severely punished for every offense against the collective morality, offenders in an organic society are likely to be asked to make restitution to those who have been harmed by their actions. Although some repressive law continues
to exist in a society with organic solidarity (e.g., the death penalty), restitutive law predominates, especially for minor offenses.

In summary, Durkheim argued in The Division of Labor that the form of moral solidarity has changed in modern society, not disappeared. We have a new form of solidarity that allows for more interdependence and closer, less competitive relations and that produces a new form of law based on restitution. However, this book was far from a celebration of modern society. Durkheim argued that this new form of solidarity is prone to certain kinds of social pathologies.

**Normal and Pathological**

Perhaps the most controversial of Durkheim’s claims was that the sociologist is able to distinguish between healthy and pathological societies. After using this idea in The Division of Labor, Durkheim wrote another book, The Rules of Sociological Method (1895/1982), in which, among other things, he attempted to refine and defend this idea. He claimed that a healthy society can be recognized because the sociologist will find similar conditions in other societies in similar stages. If a society departs from what is normally found, it is probably pathological.

This idea was attacked at the time, and there are few sociologists today who subscribe to it. Even Durkheim, when he wrote the “Preface to the Second Edition” of The Rules, no longer attempted to defend it: “It seems pointless for us to revert to the other controversies that this book has given rise to, for they do not touch upon anything essential. The general orientation of the method does not depend upon the procedures preferred to classify social types or distinguish the normal from the pathological” (1895/1982:45).

Nevertheless, there is one interesting idea that Durkheim derived from this argument: the idea that crime is normal (P. Smith, 2008) rather than pathological. He argued that because crime is found in every society, it must be normal and provide a useful function. Crime, he claimed, helps societies define and delineate their collective conscience: “Imagine a community of saints in an exemplary and perfect monastery. In it crime as such will be unknown, but faults that appear venial to the ordinary person will arouse the same scandal as does normal crime in ordinary consciences. If therefore that community has the power to judge and punish, it will term such acts criminal and deal with them as such” (Durkheim, 1895/1982:100).

In The Division of Labor, Durkheim used the idea of pathology to criticize some of the “abnormal” forms the division of labor takes in modern society. He identified three abnormal forms: (1) the anomic division of labor, (2) the forced division of labor, and (3) the poorly coordinated division of labor. Durkheim maintained that the moral crises of modernity that Comte and others had identified with the division of labor were really caused by these abnormal forms.

The anomic division of labor refers to the lack of regulation in a society that celebrates isolated individuality and refrains from telling people what they should do. Durkheim further developed this concept of anomic in his work on suicide (discussed later). In both works, he used the term to refer to social conditions in which humans lack sufficient moral restraint (Bar-Haim, 1997; Hilbert, 1986). For Durkheim, modern society is
always prone to anomie, but it comes to the fore in times of social and economic crises.

Without the strong common morality of mechanical solidarity, people might not have a clear concept of what is and what is not proper and acceptable behavior. Even though the division of labor is a source of cohesion in modern society, it cannot entirely make up for the weakening of the common morality. Individuals can become isolated and be cut adrift in their highly specialized activities. They can more easily cease to feel a common bond with those who work and live around them. This gives rise to anomie. Organic solidarity is prone to this particular “pathology,” but it is important to remember that Durkheim saw this as an abnormal situation. The modern division of labor has the capacity to promote increased moral interactions rather than reducing people to isolated and meaningless tasks and positions.

While Durkheim believed that people needed rules and regulation to tell them what to do, his second abnormal form pointed to a kind of rule that could lead to conflict and isolation and therefore increase anomie. He called this the forced division of labor. This second pathology refers to the fact that outdated norms and expectations can force individuals, groups, and classes into positions for which they are ill suited. Traditions, economic power, or status can determine who performs what jobs regardless of talent and qualification. It is here that Durkheim comes closest to a Marxist position:

If one class in society is obliged, in order to live, to take any price for its services, while another class can pass over this situation, because of the resources already at its disposal, resources that, however, are not necessarily the result of some social superiority, the latter group has an unjust advantage over the former with respect to the law.

(Durkheim, 1895/1982:319)

Finally, the third form of abnormal division of labor is evident when the specialized functions performed by different people are poorly coordinated. Again Durkheim makes the point that organic solidarity flows from the interdependence of people. If people’s specializations do not result in increased interdependence but simply in isolation, the division of labor will not result in social solidarity.

**Justice**

For the division of labor to function as a moral and socially solidifying force in modern society, anomie, the forced division of labor, and the improper coordination of specialization must be addressed. Modern societies are no longer held together by shared experiences and common beliefs. Instead, they are held together through their very differences, so long as those differences are allowed to develop in a way that promotes interdependence. Key to this for Durkheim is social justice:

The task of the most advanced societies is, then, a work of justice.... Just as the idea of lower societies was to create or maintain as intense a common life as possible, in which the individual was absorbed, so our ideal is to make social relations always more equitable, so as to assure the free development of all our
socially useful forces.

(Durkheim, 1893/1964:387)

Morality, social solidarity, justice—these were big themes for a first book in a fledgling field. Durkheim was to return to these ideas again in his work, but never again would he look at them in terms of society as a whole. He predicted in his second book, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895/1982:184), that sociology itself would succumb to the division of labor and break down into a collection of specialties. Whether this has led to an increased interdependence and an organic solidarity in sociology is still an open question.
Anti-Semitism and the Dreyfus Affair: Historical Contexts

In his recent biography of Durkheim, Marcel Fournier (2007/2013) dedicated an entire chapter to the Dreyfus affair. The affair, which stretched from 1894 to 1906, was a major event in turn-of-the-century France and discussed throughout Europe. It stirred up tremendous anti-Semitic sentiment across France and threatened the ideals of the Third Republic: the commitment to secular reason and the principle of equality before the law.

On December 22, 1894, a Jewish captain in the French army, Alfred Dreyfus, was found guilty by a military court of passing secrets to Germany. Dreyfus was punished by exile for life to Devil’s Island, a colony in French Guyana. As years passed, French Jewish intellectuals, including Durkheim, became convinced of Dreyfus’s innocence. Evidence had come to light that another military officer, Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, was in fact guilty of the treason and that the military command had hidden evidence to support this claim. The affair came to a head in 1898 when the novelist Emile Zola published a condemnation of the trial and cover-up in the French newspaper L’Aurore. The front-page headline read “J’accuse …” (“I accuse …”) and Zola proceeded to describe the details of the false accusation and the shady events that followed:

Ah, for anyone who knows the true details of the first affair, what a nightmare it is! Major du Paty de Clam arrests Dreyfus and has him placed in solitary confinement. He rushes to the home of Madame Dreyfus and terrifies her, saying that if she speaks up, her husband is lost. Meanwhile the unfortunate man is tearing out his hair, clamouring his innocence. And that is how the investigation proceeded, as in some fifteenth-century chronicle, shrouded in mystery and a wealth of the wildest expedients, and all on the basis of a single, childish accusation, that idiotic bordereau, which was not only a very ordinary kind of treason but also the most impudent kind of swindle, since almost all of the so-called secrets that had supposedly been turned over to the enemy were of no value. I dwell on this point because this is the egg from which the real crime—the dreadful denial of justice which has laid France low—was later to hatch (Zola, cited in Burns, 1999:94–95).

The publication of the letter led to anti-Semitic violence. “In various towns, including Bordeaux [where Durkheim taught] thousands of people demonstrated in the streets to the cry of: ‘Death to the Jews, Death to Zola, Death to Dreyfus’” (Fournier, 2007/2013:285). Rather than rallying around the principles of freedom, equality, and reason—fair treatment before the law—the French people descended into angry racial prejudice. For this letter, Zola was arrested and sentenced to prison on the charge of slander.

Despite risk to his career, Durkheim took a public stance against the injustices of the affair. He signed petitions, wrote a newspaper editorial, and actively sought the support of his colleagues at Bordeaux. Durkheim also wrote a short analysis of anti-Semitism titled “Anti-Semitism and Social Crisis,” in which he offered his version of the “scapegoat” theory of anti-Semitism: “When society suffers, it needs someone to blame, someone upon whom to avenge itself for its disappointments; and those persons whom opinion already disfavors are naturally singled out for this role. It is the pariahs who serve as expiatory victims” (Durkheim, 1899/2008:322; Goldberg, 2008). Also in response to the turmoil, Durkheim (1900/1973a) wrote a famous essay titled “Individualism and the Intellectuals.” In this essay he developed the idea that one of the most important sources of modern solidarity is respect for the rights of the individual.

Finally, in response to the affair, Durkheim played a role in the establishment of the Ligue pour la défense des droits de l’homme et du citoyen (League for the Defense of the Rights of Man and Citizen). The league was guided by two goals: (1) to use propaganda to enshrine the principles of the [French] Revolution in both law and institutions and (2) to give advice and counselling to anyone whose freedom had been threatened or whose rights had been violated (Fournier, 2007/2013:291). The league was an early model for groups that now organize around the defense of human rights. The resistance and protest proved effective. In September 1899 Dreyfus was pardoned.
Suicide

It has been suggested that Durkheim’s study of suicide is the paradigmatic example of how a sociologist should connect theory and research (Merton, 1968). Indeed, Durkheim makes it clear in the preface that he intended this study not only to contribute to the understanding of a particular social problem but also to serve as an example of his new sociological method. (For a series of appraisals of Suicide nearly one hundred years after its publication, see Lester, 1994.)

Durkheim chose to study suicide because it is a relatively concrete and specific phenomenon for which there were comparatively good data available. However, Durkheim’s most important reason for studying suicide was to prove the power of the new science of sociology. Suicide is generally considered to be one of the most private and personal acts. Durkheim believed that if he could show that sociology had a role to play in explaining such a seemingly individualistic act as suicide, it would be relatively easy to extend sociology’s domain to phenomena that are much more readily seen as open to sociological analysis.

As a sociologist, Durkheim was not concerned with studying why any specific individual committed suicide (for a critique of this, see Berk, 2006); that was to be left to the psychologists. Instead, Durkheim was interested in explaining differences in suicide rates; that is, he was interested in why one group had a higher rate of suicide than did another. Psychological or biological factors may explain why a particular individual in a group commits suicide, but Durkheim assumed that only social facts could explain why one group had a higher rate of suicide than did another. (For a critique of this approach and efforts to include cultural and psychological factors in the study of suicide, see Abrutyn and Mueller, 2014; Hamlin and Brym, 2006.)

Durkheim proposed two related ways of evaluating suicide rates. One way is to compare different societies or other types of collectivities. Another way is to look at the changes in the suicide rate in the same collectivity over time. In either case, cross-culturally or historically, the logic of the argument is essentially the same. If there is variation in suicide rates from one group to another or from one time period to another, Durkheim believed that the difference would be the consequence of variations in sociological factors, in particular, social currents. Durkheim acknowledged that individuals may have reasons for committing suicide, but these reasons are not the real cause: “They may be said to indicate the individual’s weak points, where the outside current bearing the impulse to self-destruction most easily finds introduction. But they are no part of this current itself, and consequently cannot help us to understand it” (1897/1951:151).

Durkheim began Suicide by testing and rejecting a series of alternative ideas about the causes of suicide. Among these are individual psychopathology, alcoholism, race, heredity, and climate. Not all of Durkheim’s arguments are convincing (see, e.g., Skog, 1991, for an examination of Durkheim’s argument against alcoholism). However, what is important is his method of empirically dismissing what he considered extraneous factors so that he could get to what he thought of as the most important causal variables.

In addition, Durkheim examined and rejected Gabriel Tarde’s imitation (or contagion) theory of suicide. Consistent with his more general theory of imitation, Tarde (1903) argued that people commit suicide...
because they are imitating the actions of others. Against the imitation theory of suicide, Durkheim argued that suicide is a social fact that is best explained through social facts. For example, Durkheim reasoned that if imitation were truly important, we should find that nations that border on a country with a high suicide rate would also have high rates, but an examination of the data showed that no such relationship existed. Durkheim admitted that some individual suicides may be the result of imitation, but it is such a minor factor that it has no significant effect on the overall suicide rate.

Durkheim concluded that the critical factors in differences in suicide rates were to be found in differences at the level of social facts. Different groups have different collective sentiments, which produce different social currents. It is these social currents that affect individual decisions about suicide. In other words, changes in the collective sentiments lead to changes in social currents, which, in turn, lead to changes in suicide rates.

### The Four Types of Suicide

Durkheim’s theory of suicide can be seen more clearly if we examine the relation between the types of suicide and his two underlying social facts—integration and regulation (Pope, 1976). Integration refers to the strength of the attachment that we have to society. Regulation refers to the degree of external constraint on people. For Durkheim, the two social currents are continuous variables, and suicide rates go up when either of these currents is too low or too high. We therefore have four types of suicide (Table 7.2). If integration is high, Durkheim calls that type of suicide altruistic. Low integration results in an increase in egoistic suicides. Fatalistic suicide is associated with high regulation, and anomic suicide with low regulation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integration</th>
<th>Regulation</th>
<th>Type of Suicide</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Egoistic suicide</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Altruistic suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Anomic suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fatalistic suicide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Egoistic Suicide

High rates of *egoistic suicide* (Berk, 2006) are likely to be found in societies or groups in which the individual is not well integrated into the larger social unit. This lack of integration leads to a feeling that the individual is not part of society, but this also means that society is not part of the individual. Durkheim believed that the best parts of a human being—our morality, values, and sense of purpose—come from society. An integrated society provides us with these things, as well as a general feeling of moral support to get us through the daily small indignities and trivial disappointments. Without these things, we are liable to commit suicide at the smallest frustration.

The lack of social integration produces distinctive social currents, and these currents cause differences in suicide rates. For example, Durkheim talked of societal disintegration leading to “currents of depression and disillusionment” (1897/1951:214). Politics is dominated by a sense of futility, morality is seen as an individual choice, and popular philosophies stress the meaninglessness of life. In contrast, strongly integrated groups
discourage suicide. The protective, enveloping social currents produced by integrated societies prevent the widespread occurrence of egoistic suicide by providing people with, among other things, a sense of the broader meaning of their lives. Here is the way Durkheim put it regarding religious groups:

Religion protects man against the desire for self-destruction…. What constitutes religion is the existence of a certain number of beliefs and practices common to all the faithful, traditional and thus obligatory. The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community, also the greater its preservative value.

(Durkheim, 1897/1951:170)

However, Durkheim demonstrated that not all religions provide the same degree of protection from suicide. Protestant religions, with their emphasis on individual faith over church community and their lack of communal rituals, tend to provide less protection. His principal point is that it is not the particular beliefs of the religion that are important, but rather the degree of integration.

Durkheim’s statistics also showed that suicide rates go up for those who are unmarried and therefore less integrated into a family, whereas the rates go down in times of national political crises such as wars and revolutions, when social causes and revolutionary or nationalist fervor give people’s lives greater meaning. He argues that the only thing that all of these factors have in common is the increased feeling of integration.

Interestingly, Durkheim affirms the importance of social forces even in the case of egoistic suicide, where the individual might be thought to be free of social constraints. Actors are never free of the force of the collectivity: “However individualized a man may be, there is always something collective remaining—the very depression and melancholy resulting from this same exaggerated individualism. He effects communion through sadness when he no longer has anything else with which to achieve it” (Durkheim, 1897/1951:214). The case of egoistic suicide indicates that in even the most individualistic, most private of acts, social facts are the key determinant.

Altruistic Suicide

The second type of suicide discussed by Durkheim is altruistic suicide. Whereas egoistic suicide is more likely to occur when social integration is too weak, altruistic suicide is more likely to occur when “social integration is too strong” (Durkheim, 1897/1951:217). The individual is literally forced into committing suicide.

One notorious example of altruistic suicide was the mass suicide of the followers of the Reverend Jim Jones in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. They knowingly took a poisoned drink and in some cases had their children drink it as well. They clearly were committing suicide because they were so tightly integrated into the society of Jones’s fanatical followers. Durkheim noted that this is also the explanation for those who seek to be martyrs (Durkheim, 1897/1951:225), as in the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, and in Paris on November 13, 2014. More generally, those who commit altruistic suicide do so because they feel that it is their duty to do so. Durkheim argued that this is particularly likely in the military, where
the degree of integration is so strong that an individual will feel that he or she has disgraced the entire group by the most trivial of failures.

Whereas higher rates of egoistic suicide stem from “incurable weariness and sad depression,” the increased likelihood of altruistic suicide “springs from hope, for it depends on the belief in beautiful perspectives beyond this life” (Durkheim, 1897/1951:225). When integration is low, people will commit suicide because they have no greater good to sustain them. When integration is high, they commit suicide in the name of that greater good.

**Anomic Suicide**

The third major form of suicide discussed by Durkheim is *anomic suicide*, which is more likely to occur when the regulative powers of society are disrupted. Such disruptions are likely to leave individuals dissatisfied because there is little control over their passions, which are free to run wild in an insatiable race for gratification. Rates of anomic suicide are likely to rise whether the nature of the disruption is positive (e.g., an economic boom) or negative (an economic depression). Either type of disruption renders the collectivity temporarily incapable of exercising its authority over individuals. Such changes put people in new situations in which the old norms no longer apply but new ones have yet to develop. Periods of disruption unleash currents of anomie—moods of rootlessness and normlessness—and these currents lead to an increase in rates of anomic suicide. This is relatively easy to envisage in the case of an economic depression. The closing of a factory because of a depression may lead to the loss of a job, with the result that the individual is cut adrift from the regulative effect that both the company and the job may have had. Being cut off from these structures or others (e.g., family, religion, and state) can leave an individual highly vulnerable to the effects of currents of anomie.

Somewhat more difficult to imagine is the effect of an economic boom. In this case, Durkheim argued that sudden success leads individuals away from the traditional structures in which they are embedded. It may lead individuals to quit their jobs, move to a new community, perhaps even find a new spouse. All these changes disrupt the regulative effect of extant structures and leave the individual in boom periods vulnerable to anomic social currents. In such a condition, people's activity is released from regulation, and even their dreams are no longer restrained. People in an economic boom seem to have limitless prospects, and “reality seems valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations” (Durkheim, 1897/1951:256).

The increases in rates of anomic suicide during periods of deregulation of social life are consistent with Durkheim's views on the pernicious effect of individual passions when freed of external constraint. People thus freed will become slaves to their passions and as a result, in Durkheim's view, commit a wide range of destructive acts, including killing themselves.

**Fatalistic Suicide**

There is a little-mentioned fourth type of suicide—fatalistic—that Durkheim discussed only in a footnote in *Suicide* (Acevedo, 2005; Besnard, 1993). Whereas anomic suicide is more likely to occur in situations in which regulation is too weak, *fatalistic suicide* is more likely to occur when regulation is excessive. Durkheim
(1897/1951:276) described those who are more likely to commit fatalistic suicide as “persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline.” The classic example is the slave who takes his own life because of the hopelessness associated with the oppressive regulation of his every action. Too much regulation—oppression—unleashes currents of melancholy that, in turn, cause a rise in the rate of fatalistic suicide.

Durkheim argued that social currents cause changes in the rates of suicides. Individual suicides are affected by these underlying currents of egoism, altruism, anomie, and fatalism. This proved, for Durkheim, that these currents are more than just the sum of individuals, but are sui generis forces, because they dominate the decisions of individuals. Without this assumption, the stability of the suicide rate for any particular society could not be explained.

**Suicide Rates and Social Reform**

Durkheim concluded his study of suicide with an examination of what reforms could be undertaken to prevent it. He believed most attempts to prevent suicide fail because it is seen as an individual problem. Attempts to directly convince individuals not to commit suicide are futile, Durkheim thought, because the real causes of suicide are rooted in society.

Of course, the first question to be asked is whether suicide should be prevented or whether it counts among those social phenomena that Durkheim would call normal because of its widespread prevalence. This is an especially important question for Durkheim because his theory says that suicides result from social currents that, in a less exaggerated form, are good for society. We would not want to stop all economic booms because they lead to anomic suicides, nor would we stop valuing individuality because it leads to egoistic suicide. Similarly, altruistic suicide results from our virtuous tendency to sacrifice ourselves for the community. The pursuit of progress, the belief in the individual, and the spirit of sacrifice all have their place in society and cannot exist without generating some suicides.

Durkheim admitted that some suicide is normal, but he argued that modern society has seen a pathological increase in both egoistic and anomic suicides. Here his position can be traced back to *The Division of Labor*, where he argued that the anomie of modern culture is due to the abnormal way in which labor is divided so that it leads to isolation rather than interdependence. What is needed, then, is a way to preserve the benefits of modernity without unduly increasing suicides—a way of balancing these social currents. In our society, Durkheim believed, these currents are out of balance. In particular, social regulation and integration are too low, leading to an abnormal rate of anomic and egoistic suicides.

Many of the existing institutions for connecting the individual and society have failed, and Durkheim saw little hope of their success. The modern state is too distant from the individual to influence his or her life with enough force and continuity. The church cannot exert its integrating effect without at the same time repressing freedom of thought. Even the family, possibly the most integrative institution in modern society, will fail in this task because it is subject to the same corrosive conditions that are increasing suicide.
Instead, what Durkheim suggested is the need of a different institution based on occupational groups. We discuss these occupational associations later, but what is important here is that Durkheim proposed a social solution to a social problem.
The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Early and Late Durkheimian Theory

Before we go on to Durkheim’s last great sociological work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1965), we should say some things about the way in which his ideas were received into American sociology. As we said, Durkheim is seen as the “father” of modern sociology, but, unlike biological paternity, the parentage of disciplines is not susceptible to DNA tests and therefore must be seen as a social construction. To a large degree, Durkheim was awarded his status of “father” by one of America’s greatest theorists, Talcott Parsons (1937), and this has influenced subsequent views of Durkheim.

Parsons presented Durkheim as undergoing a theoretical change between *Suicide* and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. He believed that the early Durkheim was primarily a positivist who tried to apply the methods of the natural sciences to the study of society, whereas the later Durkheim was an idealist who traced social changes to changes in collective ideas. Even though Parsons (1975) later admitted that this division was “overdone,” it has made its way into many sociologists’ understanding of Durkheim. For the most part, sociologists tend to find an early or a late Durkheim they agree with and emphasize that aspect of his work.

There is some truth to this periodization of Durkheim, but it seems to be more a matter of his focus than any great theoretical shift. Durkheim always believed that social forces were akin to natural forces and always believed that collective ideas shaped social practices as well as vice versa. However, there is no doubt that after *Suicide*, the question of religion became of overriding importance in Durkheim’s sociological theory. It would be wrong to see this as a form of idealism. In fact, we see in the text that Durkheim was actually worried that he would be seen as too materialistic because he assumed that religious beliefs are dependent upon such concrete social practices as rituals.

In addition, Durkheim, in his later period, more directly addressed how individuals internalize social structures. Durkheim’s often overly zealous arguments for sociology and against psychology have led many to argue that he had little to offer on how social facts affected the consciousnesses of human actors (Lukes, 1972:228). This was particularly true in his early work, where he dealt with the link between social facts and individual consciousness in only a vague and cursory way. Nevertheless, Durkheim’s ultimate goal was to explain how individual humans are shaped by social facts. We see his clear announcement of that intent in regard to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: “In general, we hold that sociology has not completely achieved its task so long as it has not penetrated into the mind … of the individual in order to relate the institutions it seeks to explain to their psychological conditions…. Man is for us less a point of departure than a point of arrival” (Durkheim, cited in Lukes, 1972:498–499). As we see in what follows, he proposed a theory of ritual and effervescence that addressed the link between social facts and human consciousness, as did his work on moral education.

Theory of Religion—The Sacred and the Profane
Raymond Aron (1965:45) said of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that it was Durkheim’s most important, most profound, and most original work. Randall Collins and Michael Makowsky (1998:107) called it “perhaps the greatest single book of the twentieth century.” In this book, Durkheim put forward both a sociology of religion and a theory of knowledge. His sociology of religion consisted of an attempt to identify the enduring essence of religion through an analysis of its most primitive forms. His theory of knowledge attempted to connect the fundamental categories of human thought to their social origins. It was Durkheim’s great genius to propose a sociological connection between these two disparate puzzles. Put briefly, he found the enduring essence of religion in the setting apart of the sacred from all that is profane (Edwards, 2007). This sacred is created through rituals that transform the moral power of society into religious symbols that bind individuals to the group. Durkheim’s most daring argument is that this moral bond becomes a cognitive bond because the categories for understanding, such as classification, time, space, and causation, are also derived from religious rituals.

Let us start with Durkheim’s theory of religion. Society (through individuals) creates religion by defining certain phenomena as sacred and others as profane. Those aspects of social reality that are defined as *sacred*—that is, that are set apart from the everyday—form the essence of religion. The rest are defined as *profane*—the commonplace, the utilitarian, the mundane aspects of life. On the one hand, the sacred brings out an attitude of reverence, awe, and obligation. On the other hand, it is the attitude accorded to these phenomena that transforms them from profane to sacred. The question for Durkheim was, What is the source of this reverence, awe, and obligation?

Here he proposed to retain the essential truth of religion while revealing its sociological reality. Durkheim refused to believe that all religion is nothing but an illusion. Such a pervasive social phenomenon must have some truth. However, that truth need not be precisely that which is believed by the participants. Indeed, as a strict agnostic, Durkheim could not believe that anything supernatural was the source of these religious feelings. There really is a superior moral power that inspires believers, but it is society and not God. Durkheim argued that religion symbolically embodies society itself. Religion is the system of symbols by means of which society becomes conscious of itself. This was the only way that he could explain why every society has religious beliefs but each has different beliefs.

Society is a power that is greater than we are. It transcends us, demands our sacrifices, suppresses our selfish tendencies, and fills us with energy. Society, according to Durkheim, exercises these powers through representations. In God, he saw “only society transfigured and symbolically expressed” (Durkheim, 1906/1974:52). Thus society is the source of the sacred.

**Beliefs, Rituals, and Church**

The differentiation between the sacred and the profane and the elevation of some aspects of social life to the sacred level are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the development of religion. Three other conditions are needed. First, there must be the development of a set of religious beliefs. These *beliefs* are “the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things” (Durkheim, 1912/1965:56). Second, a set of religious *rituals* is necessary.
These are “the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects” (56). Finally, a religion requires a church, or a single overarching moral community. The interrelationships among the sacred, beliefs, rituals, and church led Durkheim to the following definition of a religion: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (62).

Rituals and the church are important to Durkheim’s theory of religion because they connect the representations of the social to individual practices. Durkheim often assumed that social currents are simply absorbed by individuals through some sort of contagion, but here he spelled out how such a process might work. Individuals learn about the sacred and its associated beliefs through participating in rituals and in the community of the church. As we will see later, this is also how individuals learn the categories of understanding (Rawls, 1996). Furthermore, rituals and the church keep social representations from dissipating and losing their force by dramatically reenacting the collective memory of the group. Finally, they reconnect individuals to the social, a source of greater energy that inspires them when they return to their mundane pursuits.

**Why Primitive?**

Although the research reported in *The Elementary Forms* was not Durkheim’s own, he felt it necessary, given his commitment to empirical science, to embed his thinking on religion in published data. The major sources of his data were studies of a clan-based Australian tribe, the Arunta, who, for Durkheim, represented primitive culture. Although today we are very skeptical of the idea that some cultures are more primitive than others, Durkheim wanted to study religion within a “primitive” culture for several reasons. First, he believed that it is much easier to gain insight into the essential nature of religion in a primitive culture because the ideological systems of primitive religions are less well developed than are those of modern religions, with the result that there is less obfuscation. In addition, whereas religion in modern society takes diverse forms, in primitive society there is “intellectual and moral conformity” (Durkheim, 1912/1965:18). This makes it easier to relate the common beliefs to the common social structures.

Durkheim studied primitive religion only to shed light on religion in modern society. Religion in a nonmodern society is an all-encompassing collective conscience. But as society grows more specialized, religion comes to occupy an increasingly narrower domain. It becomes simply one of a number of collective representations. Although it expresses some collective sentiments, other institutions (e.g., law and science) come to express other aspects of the collective morality. Durkheim recognized that religion per se comes to occupy an ever narrower domain, but he also contended that most, if not all, of the various collective representations of modern society have their origin in the all-encompassing religion of primitive society.

**Collective Effervescence**

Durkheim argued that the life of the clan is divided between two phases. In the first of these phases, the clan separates into small groups and these groups live independently from one another, pursuing their occupations. In this “dispersed condition,” life is “uniform, languishing and dull” (1912/2012:215). In the other phase,
members of the clan gather together in celebration of religious ceremony. This phase might last days or months, but the point is that the mere concentration of many people in intense interaction serves as an “exceptionally powerful stimulant” (215). In these intensified interactions, people are excited by one another’s presence and generate otherwise impossible energies and enthusiasms. Durkheim referred to these collective energies as *collective effervescence* and describes their production this way:

> Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it goes, as an avalanche grows in its advance. And as such active passions so free from all control could not fail to burst out, on every side one sees nothing but violent gestures, cries, veritable howls, and deafening noises of every sort, which aid in intensifying still more the state of mind which they manifest. And since a collective sentiment cannot express itself collectively except on the condition of observing a certain order permitting co-operation and movements in unison, these gestures and cries naturally tend to become rhythmic and regular; hence come songs and dances.

(Durkheim, 1912/2012:215–216)

The important idea for Durkheim is that this experience of effervescence gives rise to the idea of religion. Participants feel as if they have been overtaken by something that comes from outside of themselves; effervescence is encountered as a force that compels them to action. The experience of this effervescent energy is the basis for the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The group and its shared energies is sacred, whereas all else is profane. This is also the basis for the group identity. As described in the previous quotation, collective energy acquires form as song and dance, but it also gets named and becomes a collective representation—a shared symbol. As we describe in more detail in the next section, Durkheim argued that the totem is an excellent example of this kind of collective representation. On the one hand, the totem represents the energy, or moral force, of the group. On the other hand, the totem can also remind members of their collective bond and, in doing so, maintain and revive the moral force of the group (Xie, 2016).

Whereas Durkheim’s descriptions draw on nineteenth-century anthropological observations, similar forms of effervescence are quite readily observed in contemporary religious celebrations, rock concerts, sporting events, and music festivals. All of these events produce effervescent energies (dancing and collective singing) and totemic representations of the event (t-shirts and souvenirs). Durkheim also suggested that moments of great social transformation may depend upon a stirring up of a collective effervescence. For example, in his analysis of the storming of the Bastille, William Sewell Jr. (1986) argued that collective effervescence shaped the course of the French Revolution. In a particularly provocative twist on this theme, members of the Collège de Sociologie, in association with the secret society Acéphale, drew upon the concept of collective effervescence to address the social anomie of France in the 1930s. They believed that when “ordinary life becomes regular, busy and safe” it can be re-energized or re-sacralized through frenzy and festival (Pearce, 2005:119).

Departing far from Durkheim’s initial concerns with social order and stability, in an effort to combat social malaise, members of Acéphale planned, and in some cases enacted, the performance of taboo orgies, sacrificial
In the previous section we described how collective effervescence gives rise to the religious idea, which in turn is given symbolic form. Durkheim relied upon the practice of totemism, especially among the Australian Arunta, to discuss these symbolic aspects of religion. Totemism is a religious system in which certain things, particularly animals and plants, come to be regarded as sacred and as emblems of the clan. Durkheim viewed totemism as the simplest, most primitive form of religion, and he believed it to be associated with a similarly simple form of social organization, the clan.

As noted earlier, Durkheim argued that the totem is nothing but the representation of the clan itself. Individuals who experience collective effervescence in a gathering of the clan seek some explanation for this state. Durkheim believed that the gathering itself was the real cause, but even today, people are reluctant to attribute this power to social forces. Instead, the clan member mistakenly attributes the energy he or she feels to the symbols of the clan. The totems are the material representations of the nonmaterial force that is at their base, and that nonmaterial force is none other than society. Totemism and, more generally, religion are derived from the collective morality and become impersonal forces. They are not simply a series of mythical animals, plants, personalities, spirits, or gods.

As a study of primitive religion, the specifics of Durkheim’s interpretation have been questioned (Hiatt, 1996). However, even if totemism is not the most primitive religion, it was certainly the best vehicle to develop Durkheim’s new theory linking together religion, knowledge, and society.

Although a society may have a large number of totems, Durkheim did not view these totems as representing a series of separate, fragmentary beliefs about specific animals or plants. Instead, he saw them as an interrelated set of ideas that give the society a more or less complete representation of the world. In totemism, three classes of things are connected: the totemic symbol, the animal or plant, and the members of the clan. As such, totemism provides a way to classify natural objects that reflects the social organization of the tribe. Hence, Durkheim was able to argue that the ability to classify nature into cognitive categories is derived from religious and, ultimately, social experiences. Later, society may develop better ways to classify nature and its symbols, for example, into scientific genera and species, but the basic idea of classification comes from social experiences. He expanded on this idea that the social world grounds our mental categories in his earlier essay with his nephew Marcel Mauss:

Society was not simply a model which classificatory thought followed; it was its own divisions which served as divisions for the system of classification. The first logical categories were social categories; the first classes of things were classes of men…. It was because men were grouped, and thought of themselves in the form of groups, that in their ideas they grouped other things, and in the beginning the two modes of grouping were merged to the point of being indistinct.

(Durkheim and Mauss, 1903/1963:82–83)
Sociology of Knowledge

Whereas the early Durkheim was concerned with differentiating sociology from philosophy, the later Durkheim wanted to show that sociology could answer the most intractable philosophical questions. Philosophy had proposed two general models for how humans are able to develop concepts from their sense impressions. One, called empiricism, contends that our concepts are just generalizations from our sense impressions. The problem with this philosophy is that we seem to need some initial concepts such as space, time, and categories even to begin to group sense impressions together so that we can generalize from them. Consequently, another school of philosophy, apriorism, contends that we must be born with some initial categories of understanding. For Durkheim, this was really no explanation at all. How is it that we are born with these particular categories? How are they transmitted to each new generation? These are questions that Durkheim felt the philosophers could not answer. Instead, philosophers usually imply some sort of transcendentnal source. In other words, their philosophy has a religious character, and we already know what Durkheim thinks is the ultimate source of religion.

Durkheim contended that human knowledge is not a product of experience alone, nor are we just born with certain mental categories that are applied to experience. Instead our categories are social creations. They are collective representations. Marx had already proposed a sociology of knowledge, but his was purely in the negative sense. Ideology was the distortion of our knowledge by social forces. In that sense, it was a theory of false knowledge. Durkheim offers a much more powerful sociology of knowledge that explains our “true” knowledge in terms of social forces.

Categories of Understanding

*The Elementary Forms* presents an argument for the social origin of six fundamental categories that some philosophers had identified as essential to human understanding: time, space, classification, force, causality, and totality. *Time* comes from the rhythms of social life. The category of *space* develops from the division of space occupied by society. We've already discussed how in totemism *classification* is tied to the human group. *Force* is derived from experiences with social forces. Imitative rituals are the origin of the concept of *causality*. Finally, society itself is the representation of *totality* (Nielsen, 1999). These descriptions are necessarily brief, but the important point is that the fundamental categories that allow us to transform our sense impressions into abstract concepts are derived from social experiences, in particular, experiences of religious rituals. In these rituals, the bodily involvement of participants in the ritual's sounds and movements creates feelings that give rise to the categories of understanding (Rawls, 2001).

Even if our abstract concepts are based on social experiences, this does not mean that our thoughts are determined by society. Remember that social facts acquire laws of development and association of their own, and they are not reducible to their source. Although social facts emerge out of other social facts, their subsequent development is autonomous. Consequently, even though these concepts have a religious source, they can develop into nonreligious systems. In fact, this is exactly what Durkheim saw as having happened with science. Rather than being opposed to religion, science had developed out of religion.
Despite their autonomous development, some categories are universal and necessary. This is the case because these categories develop in order to facilitate social interaction. Without them, all contact between individual minds would be impossible, and social life would cease. This explains why they are universal to humanity, because everywhere, human beings have lived in societies. This also explains why they are necessary.

Hence society cannot leave the categories up to the free choice of individuals without abandoning itself. To live, it requires not only a minimum moral consensus but also a minimum logical consensus that it cannot do without either. Thus, in order to prevent dissidence, society weighs on its members with all its authority. Does a mind seek to free itself from these norms of all thought? Society no longer considers this a human mind in the full sense, and treats it accordingly.

(Durkheim, 1912/1965:16)

To summarize Durkheim’s theory of religion, society is the source of religion, the concept of God, and, ultimately, everything that is sacred (as opposed to profane). In a very real sense, then, we can argue that the sacred, God, and society are one and the same. Durkheim believed that this is fairly clear-cut in primitive society and that it remains true today, even though the relationship is greatly obscured by the complexities of modern society. To summarize Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge, he claimed that concepts and even our most fundamental categories are collective representations that society produces, at least initially, through religious rituals. Religion is what connects society and the individual, because it is through sacred rituals that social categories become the basis for individual concepts.
Moral Education and Social Reform

Durkheim did not consider himself to be political, and he avoided most partisan politics as not compatible with scientific objectivity. Nevertheless, as we’ve seen, most of his writings dealt with social issues, and, unlike some who see themselves as objective scientists today, he was not shy about suggesting specific social reforms, in particular regarding education and occupational associations. Mike Gane (2001:79) wrote that Durkheim “believed the role of social science was to provide guidance for specific kinds of social intervention.”

Durkheim saw problems in modern society as temporary aberrations and not as inherent difficulties (Fenton, 1984:45). Therefore, he believed in social reform. In taking this position, he stood in opposition to both the conservatives and the radicals of his day. Conservatives saw no hope in modern society and sought instead the restoration of the monarchy or of the political power of the Roman Catholic Church. Radicals like the socialists of Durkheim’s time agreed that the world could not be reformed, but they hoped that a revolution would bring into existence socialism or communism.

Both Durkheim’s programs for reform and his reformist approach were due to his belief that society is the source of any morality. His reform programs were dictated by the fact that society needs to be able to produce moral direction for the individual. To the extent that society is losing that capacity, it must be reformed. His reformist approach was dictated by the fact that the source for any reform has to be the actually existing society. It does no good to formulate reform programs from the viewpoint of an abstract morality. The program must be generated by that society’s social forces and not from some philosopher’s, or even sociologist’s, ethical system. “Ideals cannot be legislated into existence; they must be understood, loved and striven for by the body whose duty it is to realize them” (Durkheim, 1938/1977:38).

Morality

Durkheim offered courses and gave public lectures on moral education and the sociology of morals. And he intended, had he lived long enough, to culminate his oeuvre with a comprehensive presentation of his science of morals. The connection that Durkheim saw between sociology and morality has not until recently been appreciated by most sociologists:

It is not a coincidence, it seems to me, that the new emphasis on Durkheim should be in the areas of morality, philosophy, and intellectual milieu; it is indicative of a growing reflective need of sociology for ontological problems, those which relate professional concerns to the socio-historical situation of the profession. Whereas only a decade or so ago many sociologists might have been embarrassed if not vexed to discuss “ethics” and “morality,” the increasing amorality and immorality of the public and private sectors of our society may be tacitly leading or forcing us back to fundamental inquiries, such as the moral basis of modern society, ideal and actual. This was a central theoretical and existential concern of Durkheim.

(Tiryakian, 1974:769)
As we have said, Durkheim was centrally concerned with morality, but it is not easy to classify his theory of morality according to the typical categories. On the one hand, he was a moral relativist who believed that ethical rules do and should change in response to other social facts. On the other hand, he was a traditionalist because he did not believe that one could simply create a new morality. Any new morality could only grow out of our collective moral traditions. He insisted that one must “see in morality itself a fact the nature of which one must investigate attentively, I would even say respectfully, before daring to modify” (Durkheim, cited in Bellah, 1973:xv). Durkheim’s sociological theory of morality cuts across most of the positions concerning morality today and offers the possibility of a fresh perspective on contemporary debates over such issues as traditional families and the moral content of popular culture.

Morality, for Durkheim, has three components. First, morality involves discipline, that is, a sense of authority that resists egoistic impulses. Such constraint is necessary because individual interests and group interests are not the same and may, at least in the short term, be in conflict. Discipline confronts one with one’s moral duty, which, for Durkheim, is one’s duty to society. As discussed earlier, this social discipline also makes the individual happier because it limits his or her limitless desires and therefore provides the only chance of happiness for a being who otherwise would always want more. Second, morality involves attachment to society because society is the source of our morality. This morality complements the former. It is a willing and desired attachment rather than imposed duty. When considered in tandem, these two aspects demonstrate the complex nature of moral obligation “which [Durkheim] conceives of as simultaneously duty and desire” (Ogien, 2016: 9; see also Callegaro, 2016).

Third, morality involves autonomy, a sense of individual responsibility for our actions. Durkheim’s focus on society as the source of morality has led many to assume that his ideal actor is one who is almost wholly controlled from without—a total conformist. However, Durkheim did not subscribe to such an extreme view of the actor: “Conformity must not be pushed to the point where it completely subjugates the intellect. Thus it does not follow from a belief in the need for discipline that it must be blind and slavish” (cited in Giddens, 1972:113). Autonomy comes to full force in modernity only with the decline of the myths and symbols that previous moral systems used to demand discipline and encourage attachment. Durkheim believed that now that these myths have passed away, only scientific understanding can provide the foundation for moral autonomy. In particular, modern morality should be based on the relation between individuals and society as revealed by Durkheim’s new science of sociology. The only way for this sociological understanding to become a true morality is through education.

**Moral Education**

Durkheim’s most consistent attempts to reform society in order to enable a modern morality were directed at education (Dill, 2007). *Education* was defined by Durkheim as the process by which the individual acquires the physical, intellectual, and, most important to Durkheim, moral tools needed to function in society (Durkheim, 1922/1956:71). As Lukes (1972:359) reported, Durkheim had always believed “that the relation of the science of sociology to education was that of theory to practice.” In 1902, he was given the powerful position of head of the Sorbonne’s education department. “It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that every
young mind in Paris, in the decade prior to World War I, came directly or indirectly under his influence” (Gerstein, 1983:239).

Before Durkheim began to reform education, there had been two approaches. One saw education as an extension of the church, and the other saw education as the unfolding of the natural individual. In contrast, Durkheim argued that education should help children develop a moral attitude toward society. He believed that the schools were practically the only existing institution that could provide a social foundation for modern morality.

Durkheim viewed the classroom as a small society and concluded that its collective effervescence could be made powerful enough to inculcate a moral attitude. The classroom could provide the rich collective milieu necessary for reproducing collective representations (Durkheim, 1925/1961:229). This would allow education to present and reproduce all three elements of morality.

First, it would provide individuals with the discipline they need to restrain the passions that threaten to engulf them. Second, education could develop in the students a sense of devotion to society and to its moral system. Most important is education’s role in the development of autonomy, in which discipline is “freely desired” and the attachment to society is by virtue of “enlightened assent” (Durkheim, 1925/1961:120).

For to teach morality is neither to preach nor to indoctrinate; it is to explain. If we refuse the child all explanation of this sort, if we do not try to help him understand the reasons for the rules he should abide by, we would be condemning him to an incomplete and inferior morality.

(Durkheim, 1925/1961:120–121)

**Occupational Associations**

As discussed, the primary problem that Durkheim saw in modern society was the lack of integration and regulation. Even though the cult of the individual provided a collective representation, Durkheim believed that there was a lack of social organizations that people could feel part of and that could tell people what they should and should not do. The modern state is too distant to influence most individuals. The church tends to integrate people by repressing freedom of thought. And the family is too particular and does not integrate individuals into society as a whole. As we’ve seen, the schools provided an excellent milieu for children. For adults, Durkheim proposed another institution: the occupational association.

Genuine moral commitments require a concrete group tied to the basic organizing principle of modern society, the division of labor. Durkheim proposed the development of occupational associations. All the workers, managers, and owners involved in a particular industry should join together in an association that would be both professional and social. Durkheim did not believe that there was a basic conflict of interest among the owners, managers, and workers within an industry. In this, of course, he took a position diametrically opposed to that of Marx, who saw an essential conflict of interest between the owners and the workers. Durkheim believed that any such conflict occurred only because the various people involved lacked a
common morality, which was traceable to the lack of an integrative structure. He suggested that the structure that was needed to provide this integrative morality was the occupational association, which would encompass “all the agents of the same industry united and organized into a single group” (Durkheim, 1893/1964:5). Such an organization was deemed to be superior to such organizations as labor unions and employer associations, which, in Durkheim’s view, served only to intensify the differences between owners, managers, and workers. Involved in a common organization, people in these categories would recognize their common interests as well as their common need for an integrative moral system. That moral system, with its derived rules and laws, would serve to counteract the tendency toward atomization in modern society as well as help stop the decline in the significance of collective morality.
Criticisms

As mentioned earlier, Durkheim’s reception into American sociology was strongly influenced by Talcott Parsons, who presented Durkheim as both a functionalist and a positivist. As numerous contemporary scholars have attempted to show, these labels don’t fairly characterize Durkheim (Milbrandt and Pearce, 2011; Rawls, 2012, 2016). Nevertheless, a number of criticisms have been directed at his ideas on the basis of these characterizations. Because sociology students are bound to come across these criticisms, they are briefly addressed here.

Durkheim’s focus on macro-level social facts was one of the reasons his work played a central role in the development of structural functionalism, which has a similar, macro-level orientation. However, whether Durkheim himself was a functionalist is open to debate and depends upon how one defines functionalism. Functionalism can be defined in two different ways, a weak sense and a strong sense. When Kingsley Davis (1959:758) said that all sociologists are functionalists, he was referring to the weak sense: that functionalism is an approach that attempts “to relate the parts of society to the whole, and to relate one part to another.” A stronger definition of functionalism is given by Jonathan H. Turner and Alexandra R. Maryanski (1988), who define it as an approach that is based on seeing society as analogous to a biological organism and attempts to explain particular social structures in terms of the needs of society as a whole.

In this second sense, Durkheim was only an occasional and, one might say, accidental functionalist. Durkheim was not absolutely opposed to drawing analogies between biological organisms and social structures (Lehmann, 1993a:15), but he did not believe that sociologists could infer sociological laws by analogy with biology. Durkheim (1898/1974:1) called such inferences “worthless.”

Durkheim urged that we distinguish functions from the historical causes of social facts. The historical study is primary because social needs cannot simply call structures into existence. Certainly, Durkheim’s initial hypothesis was always that enduring social facts probably perform some sort of function, but he recognized that some social facts are historical accidents. Furthermore, we see in Durkheim no attempt to predefine the needs of society. Instead, the needs of a particular society can be established only by studying that society. Consequently, any functionalist approach must be preceded by a historical study.

Durkheim is often criticized also for being a positivist, and indeed, he used the term to describe himself. However, as Robert Hall noted, the meaning of the term has changed:

The term “positive” was needed to distinguish the new approach from those of the philosophers who had taken to calling their ethical theories “scientific” and who used this term to indicate the dialectical reasoning they employed. In an age in which one could still speak of the “science” of metaphysics, the term “positive” simply indicated an empirical approach.

(R. Hall, 1987:137)
Today, positivism refers to the belief that social phenomena should be studied with the same methods as the natural sciences, and it is likely that Durkheim would accept this. However, it has also come to mean a focus on invariant laws (S. Turner, 1993), and we find little of that in Durkheim. Social facts were, for Durkheim, autonomous from their substrate, but also autonomous in their relation to other social facts. Each social fact required historical investigation, and none could be predicted on the basis of invariant laws.

Durkheim has also been criticized for his view of the individual. Despite having made a number of crucial assumptions about human nature, Durkheim denied that he had done so. He argued that he did not begin by postulating a certain conception of human nature in order to deduce a sociology from it. Instead, he said that it was from sociology that he sought an increasing understanding of human nature. However, Durkheim may have been less than honest with his readers, and perhaps even with himself.

One of Durkheim’s assumptions about human nature—one that we have already encountered—may be viewed as the basis of his entire sociology. That assumption is that people are impelled by their passions into a mad search for gratification that always leads to a need for more. If these passions are unrestrained, they multiply to the point where the individual is enslaved by them and they become a threat to the individual as well as to society. However, Durkheim provided no evidence for this assumption, and indeed, his own theories would suggest that such an insatiable subject may be a creation of social structures rather than the other way around.

In addition, Durkheim is frequently said to have failed to give consciousness an active role in the social process. He treated the actor and the actor’s mental processes as secondary factors or, more commonly, as dependent variables to be explained by the independent and decisive variables—social facts. Individuals are, in general, controlled by social forces in his theories; they do not actively control those forces. Autonomy, for Durkheim, meant nothing more than freely accepting those social forces. However, even if we accept that consciousness and some mental processes are types of social facts, there is no reason to suppose that they cannot develop the same autonomy that Durkheim recognized in other social facts.

Indeed, Francesco Callegaro (2012:453) argued that for Durkheim the “person is … the highest ideal of modern societies, structured as they are around a cult of the person which asks and enables each modern social individual to become an autonomous individual.” The capacity for thought, to act according to reason, is not an inherent property of persons. Instead it is an achievement of society. We only become thinking beings capable of reason and independent action through society. This view of the person challenges most contemporary theories that separate the individual from society. Durkheim’s point, which much social science is still to come to terms with, is that freedom and creativity are not inconsistent with social order and social solidarity.

Finally, Durkheim has also been criticized for his alleged conservativism (Milbrandt and Pearce, 2011). As noted earlier, Parsons’s version of Durkheim lent itself to comparisons with positivism, structural functionalism, and their conservative versions of science and society. Durkheim has also been judged a conservative because of his criticisms of socialism, his resistance to the feminist movement, his emphasis on morality, and the relative neglect he paid to the powers of individual creativity. This said, Durkheim’s
relationship with socialism was complicated and his views on morality and human nature more nuanced than usually presented. For example, although Durkheim was critical of class-based and Marxist socialism, he was sympathetic to socialism as an emerging form of collective consciousness and thereby a potential solution to modern social problems. For Durkheim, socialism, if it is to be achieved, must be based on scientific study rather than a political program. In this respect, he was critical of Marxism not because he rejected socialism but because it was a set of “disputable and out-of-date hypotheses” (Lukes, 1972:323).

Durkheim’s ideas are now more than a hundred years old. What the previously mentioned criticisms and counter criticisms indicate is that Durkheim's version of sociology remains a rich and lively source of sociological debate.
Contemporary Applications

Durkheim's influence on the field of sociology is far-reaching. His ideas are endlessly debated and have impacted research in most areas of sociology, including sociological theory, methods, crime, mental health, and religion (Milbrandt and Pearce, 2011). Perhaps most surprising, given Durkheim's focus on social facts, is that his work has inspired microsociologists such as Erving Goffman (1959) and Harold Garfinkel (2002). Rawls (2016:3) put it this way: “The argument of Goffman and Garfinkel—that identities are social facts that must be achieved in order for cooperation in constitutive practices to produce mutually intelligible social objects—is a direct offshoot [of Durkheim].” Durkheim’s ideas have also figured in the development of cultural sociology (J. Alexander, 1988b; Alexander and Smith, 2001). Jeffrey Alexander has revived Durkheimian sociology to develop a “strong program” for cultural sociology. Focusing on the irreducibility of the social fact, Alexander argues that culture must be studied as an autonomous social force. He has applied this strong program to analyze phenomena as diverse as American politics and the Holocaust.

This brings us to one recent application of Durkheim’s work. In their book The Racial Order (2015), Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond draw on ideas from numerous thinkers to develop a systematic theory of race. In particular, they rely on Durkheim's theory of culture to describe the symbolic structures of the racial order. Race, they argue, is not a natural fact inherent in biology, but it is a social fact that has a history. Culture provides the basic symbolic categories that people use to organize their perceptions of the world, in particular their perception of racial difference. Frequently, cultural structures are organized as binaries “that divide actors’ motives, social relations, and institutions into categories of sacred and profane” (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015:106). In terms of social power, those who are classified as sacred are in a position to dominate those who are classified as profane. Historically the American racial field has classified white persons of European descent as sacred and black persons as profane. These distinctions are not merely cultural but shape ”societal patterns ranging from residential and occupational segregation to intermarriage” (107).

Another contemporary phenomenon that has been examined using Durkheimian sociology is information and communication technology (ICT). Ralph Schroeder and Rich Ling (2014) draw on Durkheim (and Weber) to describe the sociological or structural features of ICTs. For example, they argue that ICTs allow for the development of a “neo-mechanical” solidarity. In contrast to the commonsense idea that ICTs separate people from one another, Schroeder and Ling (2014:797) argue that ICTs actually provide the opportunity for the development of “co-presence fostered by mediated interaction and shared digital objects.” Mobile phones allow people to maintain regular contact with intimate friends and relations. Social networking sites allow for the formation of online communities. These groups achieve cohesion through online/digital rituals—a contemporary equivalent to the songs and dances that Durkheim described in his analysis of religion: “Our gossiping, flirting and joking with our closest friends via Facebook, email or the mobile phone allow us a focused situation where there is a common sense of effervescence, to use Durkheim’s terminology” (799). This research challenges the idea that contemporary technology threatens community and society. Instead, in a very Durkheimian move, Schroeder and Ling show that these new kinds of social structures actually provide the means for the development of new kinds of solidarity.
Summary

The two main themes in Durkheim’s sociology are the priority of the social over the individual and the idea that society can be studied scientifically. These themes led to his concept of social facts. Social facts can be empirically studied, are external to the individual, are coercive of the individual, and are explained by other social facts. Durkheim differentiated between two basic types of social facts—material and nonmaterial. The most important focus for Durkheim was on nonmaterial social facts. He dealt with a number of them, including morality, collective conscience, collective representations, and social currents.

Durkheim’s first major work was *The Division of Labor in Society*, in which he argued that the collective conscience of societies with mechanical solidarity had been replaced by a new organic solidarity based on mutual interdependence in a society organized by a division of labor. He investigated the difference between mechanical and organic solidarity through an analysis of their different legal systems. He argued that mechanical solidarity is associated with repressive laws, whereas organic solidarity is associated with legal systems based on restitution.

Durkheim’s next book, a study of suicide, is a good illustration of the significance of nonmaterial social facts in his work. In his basic causal model, changes in nonmaterial social facts ultimately cause differences in suicide rates. Durkheim differentiated among four types of suicide—egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic—and showed how each is affected by different changes in social currents. The study of suicide was taken by Durkheim and his supporters as evidence that sociology has a legitimate place in the social sciences. After all, it was argued, if sociology could explain so individualistic an act as suicide, it certainly could be used to explain other, less individual aspects of social life.

In his last major work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim focused on another aspect of culture: religion. In his analysis of primitive religion, Durkheim sought to show the roots of religion in the social structure of society. It is society that defines certain things as sacred and others as profane. Durkheim demonstrated the social sources of religion in his analysis of primitive totemism and its roots in the social structure of the clan. Durkheim concluded that religion and society are one and the same, two manifestations of the same general process. He also presented a sociology of knowledge in this work. He claimed that concepts and even our most fundamental mental categories are collective representations that society produces, at least initially, through religious rituals.

Although Durkheim was against any radical change, his central concern with morality led him to propose two reforms in society that he hoped would lead to a stronger collective morality. For children, he successfully implemented a new program for moral education in France that focused on teaching children discipline, attachment to society, and autonomy. For adults, he proposed occupational associations to restore collective morality and to cope with some of the curable pathologies of the modern division of labor.

The chapter concludes with some criticisms and contemporary applications of Durkheim’s theories. Many criticisms concern his affiliation with structural functionalism, positivism, and his presumed conservatism.
His theory has been applied widely in sociology as well as to contemporary social issues such as race and the emergence of information and communication technologies.
Notes

1. For a critique of Durkheim’s attempt to separate sociology from philosophy, see Boudon (1995).

2. Before its bloody repression, Marx saw the Paris Commune as the harbinger of the proletariat revolution.

3. For a comparison with Spencer’s evolutionary theory, see Perrin (1995).

4. Durkheim was moving away from using the term collective conscience in this work, but he had not yet fully developed the idea of collective representations. We see no substantial difference between his use of collective sentiments in Suicide and his use of collective conscience in The Division of Labor.
8 Max Weber
Max Weber (1864–1920) is probably the best-known and most influential figure in sociological theory (Burger, 1993; R. Collins, 1985; Kalberg, 2011a, 2016; Sica, 2001; Whimster, 2001, 2005b). Weber’s work is so varied and subject to so many interpretations that it has influenced a wide array of sociological theories. It certainly had an influence on structural functionalism, especially through the work of Talcott Parsons. It has also come to be seen as important to the conflict tradition (R. Collins, 1975, 1990) and to critical theory, which was shaped almost as much by Weber’s ideas as it was by Karl Marx’s orientation, as well as to Jürgen Habermas, the major inheritor of the critical-theory tradition (Outhwaite, 1994). Symbolic interactionists have been affected by Weber’s ideas on verstehen, as well as by other of Weber’s ideas. Alfred Schutz was powerfully affected by Weber’s work on meanings and motives, and he, in turn, played a crucial role in the development of ethnomethodology (see Chapter 16). Rational choice theorists have acknowledged their debt to Weber (Norkus, 2000). Weber was and is a widely influential theorist.

This chapter begins with a discussion of Weber’s (1903–1917/1949) ideas on the methodology of the social sciences, which remain remarkably relevant and fruitful even today (Bruun, 2007; Ringer, 1997:171). A clear understanding of these ideas is necessary in dealing with Weber’s substantive and theoretical ideas. Weber was opposed to pure abstract theorizing. Instead, his theoretical ideas are embedded in his empirical, usually historical, research. Weber’s methodology shaped his research, and the combination of the two lies at the base of his theoretical orientation.
Methodology

History and Sociology

Even though Weber was a student of, and took his first academic job in, law, his early career was dominated by an interest in history. As Weber moved more in the direction of the relatively new field of sociology, he sought to clarify its relationship to the established field of history. Although Weber felt that each field needed the other, his view was that the task of sociology was to provide a needed “service” to history (Roth, 1976:307). In Weber’s words, sociology performed only a “preliminary, quite modest task” (cited in R. Frank, 1976:21). Weber explained the difference between sociology and history: “Sociology seeks to formulate type concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical processes. This distinguishes it from history, which is oriented to the causal analysis and explanation of individual actions, structures, and personalities possessing cultural significance” (1921/1978:19). Despite this seemingly clear-cut differentiation, in his own work Weber was able to combine the two. His sociology was oriented to the development of clear concepts so that he could perform a causal analysis of historical phenomena. Weber defined his ideal procedure as “the sure imputation of individual concrete events occurring in historical reality to concrete, historically given causes through the study of precise empirical data which have been selected from specific points of view” (1903–1917/1949:69). We can think of Weber as a historical sociologist.

Weber’s thinking on sociology was profoundly shaped by a series of intellectual debates (Methodenstreit) raging in Germany during his time. The most important of these debates was over the issue of the relationship between history and science. At the poles in this debate were those (the positivists [Halfpenny, 2005]) who thought that history was composed of general (nomothetic) laws and those (the subjectivists) who reduced history to idiosyncratic (idiographic) actions and events. (The positivists thought that history could be like a natural science; the subjectivists saw the two as radically different.) For example, a nomothetic thinker would generalize about social revolutions, whereas an idiographic analyst would focus on the specific events leading up to the American Revolution. Weber rejected both extremes and in the process developed a distinctive way of dealing with historical sociology. In Weber’s view, history is composed of unique empirical events; there can be no generalizations at the empirical level. Sociologists must, therefore, separate the empirical world from the conceptual universe that they construct. The concepts never completely capture the empirical world, but they can be used as heuristic tools for gaining a better understanding of reality. With these concepts, sociologists can develop generalizations, but these generalizations are not history and must not be confused with empirical events.

Although Weber was clearly in favor of generalizing, he also rejected historians who sought to reduce history to a simple set of laws: “For the knowledge of historical phenomena in their concreteness, the most general laws, because they are devoid of content, are also the least valuable” (1903–1917/1949:80). For example, Weber rejected one historian (Wilhelm Roscher) who took as his task the search for the laws of the historical evolution of a people and who believed that all peoples went through a typical sequence of stages (1903–1906/1975). As Weber put it, “The reduction of empirical reality … to ‘laws’ is meaningless” (1903–
1917/1949:80). In other terms: “A systematic science of culture … would be senseless in itself” (84).

This view is reflected in various specific historical studies. For example, in his study of ancient civilizations, Weber admitted that although in some respects earlier times were precursors of things to come, “the long and continuous history of Mediterranean-European civilization does not show either closed cycles or linear progress. Sometimes phenomena of ancient civilizations have disappeared entirely and then come to light again in an entirely new context” (1896–1906/1976:366).

In rejecting these opposing views of German historical scholarship, Weber fashioned his own perspective, which constituted a fusion of the two orientations. Weber felt that history (i.e., historical sociology) was appropriately concerned with both individuality and generality. The unification was accomplished through the development and utilization of general concepts (what are later called “ideal types”) in the study of particular individuals, events, or societies. These general concepts are to be used “to identify and define the individuality of each development, the characteristics which made the one conclude in a manner so different from that of the other. Thus done, one can then determine the causes which led to the differences” (Weber, 1896–1906/1976:385). In doing this kind of causal analysis, Weber rejected, at least at a conscious level, the idea of searching for a single causal agent throughout history. He instead used his conceptual arsenal to rank the various factors involved in a given historical case in terms of their causal significance (Roth, 1971).
Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Germany, on April 21, 1864, into a decidedly middle-class family (Radkau, 2005/2009). Important differences between his parents had a profound effect upon both his intellectual orientation and his psychological development. His father was a bureaucrat who rose to a relatively important political position. He was clearly a part of the political establishment and as a result eschewed any activity or idealism that would require personal sacrifice or threaten his position within the system. In addition, the senior Weber was a man who enjoyed earthly pleasures, and in this and many other ways he stood in sharp contrast to his wife. Max Weber’s mother was a devout Calvinist, a woman who sought to lead an ascetic life largely devoid of the pleasures craved by her husband. Her concerns were more otherworldly; she was disturbed by the imperfections that were signs that she was not destined for salvation. These deep differences between the parents led to marital tension, and both the differences and the tension had an immense impact on Weber.

Because it was impossible to emulate both parents, Weber was presented with a clear choice as a child (Marianne Weber, 1975:62). He first seemed to opt for his father’s orientation to life, but later he drew closer to his mother’s approach. Whatever the choice, the tension produced by the need to choose between such polar opposites negatively affected Max Weber’s psyche.

At age 18, Max Weber left home for a short time to attend the University of Heidelberg. Weber had already demonstrated intellectual precocity, but on a social level he entered Heidelberg shy and underdeveloped. However, that quickly changed after he gravitated toward his father’s way of life and joined his father’s old dueling fraternity. There he developed socially, at least in part because of the huge quantities of beer he consumed with his peers. In addition, he proudly displayed the dueling scars that were the trademark of such fraternities. Weber not only manifested his identity with his father’s way of life in these ways but also chose, at least for the time being, his father’s career—the law.

After three terms, Weber left Heidelberg for military service, and in 1884 he returned to Berlin and to his parents’ home to take
courses at the University of Berlin. He remained there for most of the next eight years as he completed his studies, earned his Ph.D., became a lawyer (see S. Turner and Factor, 1994, for a discussion of the impact of legal thinking on Weber's theorizing), and started teaching at the University of Berlin. In the process, his interests shifted more toward his lifelong concerns—economics, history, and sociology. During his eight years in Berlin, Weber was financially dependent on his father, a circumstance he progressively grew to dislike. At the same time, he moved closer to his mother's values, and his antipathy to his father increased. He adopted an ascetic life and plunged deeply into his work. For example, during one semester as a student, his work habits were described as follows: "He continues the rigid work discipline, regulates his life by the clock, divides the daily routine into exact sections for the various subjects, saves in his way, by feeding himself evenings in his room with a pound of raw chopped beef and four fried eggs" (Mitzman, 1969/1971:48; Marianne Weber, 1975:105). Thus, Weber, following his mother, had become ascetic and diligent, a compulsive worker—in contemporary terms a "workaholic."

This compulsion for work led in 1896 to a position as professor of economics at Heidelberg. But in 1897, when Weber's academic career was blossoming, his father died following a violent argument between them. Shortly thereafter Weber began to manifest symptoms that were to culminate in a nervous breakdown. Often unable to sleep or to work, Weber spent the next six or seven years in near-total collapse. After a long hiatus, some of his powers began to return in 1903, but it was not until 1904, when he delivered (in the United States) his first lecture in six and a half years, that Weber was able to begin to return to active academic life. In 1904 and 1905, he published one of his best-known works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this work, Weber announced the ascendance of his mother's religion on an academic level. Weber devoted much of his time to the study of religion, though he was not personally religious.

Although he continued to be plagued by psychological problems, after 1904 Weber was able to function, indeed to produce some of his most important work. In these years, Weber published his studies of the world's religions in world-historical perspective (e.g., China, India, and ancient Judaism). At the time of his death (June 14, 1920), he was working on his most important work, *Economy and Society* (1921/1978). Although this book was published, and subsequently translated into many languages, it was unfinished.

In addition to producing voluminous writings in this period, Weber undertook a number of other activities. He helped found the German Sociological Society in 1910. His home became a center for a wide range of intellectuals, including sociologists such as Georg Simmel, Robert Michels, and his brother Alfred Weber, as well as the philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács (Scaff, 1989:186–222). In addition, Max Weber was active politically and wrote essays on the issues of the day.

There was a tension in Weber's life and, more important, in his work between the bureaucratic mind, as represented by his father, and his mother's religiosity. This unresolved tension permeates Weber's work as it permeated his personal life.

Weber's views on historical sociology were shaped in part by the availability of, and his commitment to the study of, empirical historical data. His was the first generation of scholars to have available reliable data on historical phenomena from many parts of the world (MacRae, 1974). Weber was more inclined to immerse himself in these historical data than he was to dream up abstract generalizations about the basic thrust of history. Although this led him to some important insights, it also created serious problems in understanding his work; he often got so involved in historical detail that he lost sight of the basic reasons for the historical study. In addition, the sweep of his historical studies encompassed so many epochs and so many societies that he could do little more than make rough generalizations (Roth, 1971). Despite these problems, Weber's commitment to the scientific study of empirical phenomena made him attractive to the developing discipline of sociology in the United States.

In sum, Weber believed that history is composed of an inexhaustible array of specific phenomena. To study these phenomena, it was necessary to develop a variety of concepts designed to be useful for research on the real world. As a general rule—although Weber did not adhere to it strictly and neither do most sociologists and historians—the task of sociology was to develop these concepts, which history was to use in causal analyses of specific historical phenomena. In this way, Weber sought to combine the specific and the general
in an effort to develop a science that did justice to the complex nature of social life.

**Verstehen**

Weber felt that sociologists had an advantage over natural scientists. That advantage resided in the sociologist’s ability to understand social phenomena, whereas the natural scientist could not gain a similar understanding of the behavior of an atom or a chemical compound. The German word for understanding is *verstehen* (Soeffner, 2005). Weber’s special use of the term *verstehen* in his historical research is one of his best-known and most controversial contributions to the methodology of contemporary sociology. As we clarify what Weber meant by *verstehen*, we will also underscore some of the problems involved in his conceptualization of it. The controversy surrounding the concept of *verstehen*, as well as some of the problems involved in interpreting what Weber meant, grows out of a general problem with Weber’s methodological thoughts. As Thomas Burger (1976) argued, Weber was neither very sophisticated nor very consistent in his methodological pronouncements (see also Hekman, 1983:26). He tended to be careless and imprecise because he felt that he was simply repeating ideas that were well known in his day among German historians. Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, Weber did not think too highly of methodological reflections.

Weber’s thoughts on *verstehen* were relatively common among German historians of his day and were derived from a field known as *hermeneutics* (Brown, 2005; Martin, 2000; Pressler and Dasilva, 1996). Hermeneutics was a special approach to the understanding and interpretation of published writings. Its goal was to understand the thinking of the author as well as the basic structure of the text. Weber and others (e.g., Wilhelm Dilthey) sought to extend this idea from the understanding of texts to the understanding of social life:

> Once we have realized that the historical method is nothing more or less than the classical method of interpretation applied to overt action instead of to texts, a method aiming at identifying a human design, a “meaning” behind observable events, we shall have no difficulty in accepting that it can be just as well applied to human interaction as to individual actors. From this point of view all history is interaction, which has to be interpreted in terms of the rival plans of various actors.

*(Lachman, 1971:20)*

In other words, Weber sought to use the tools of hermeneutics to understand actors, interaction, and indeed all of human history.

One common misconception about *verstehen* is that it is simply the use of “intuition” by the researcher. Thus, many critics see it as a “soft,” irrational, subjective research methodology. However, Weber categorically rejected the idea that *verstehen* involved simply intuition, sympathetic participation, or empathy (1903–1917/1949). To him, *verstehen* involved doing systematic and rigorous research rather than simply getting a “feeling” for a text or social phenomenon. In other words, for Weber (1921/1978), *verstehen* was a rational procedure of study.
The key question in interpreting Weber’s concept of *verstehen* is whether he thought that it was most appropriately applied to the subjective states of individual actors or to the subjective aspects of large-scale units of analysis (e.g., culture). Weber’s focus on the cultural and social-structural contexts of action leads us to the view that *verstehen* is a tool for macro-level analysis.

**Causality**

Another aspect of Weber’s methodology was his commitment to the study of causality (Ringer, 1997:75). Weber was inclined to see the study of the causes of social phenomena as being within the domain of history, not sociology. Yet to the degree that history and sociology cannot be clearly separated—and they certainly are not clearly separated in Weber’s substantive work—the issue of causality is relevant to sociology. Causality is also important because it is another place in which Weber sought to combine nomothetic and idiographic approaches.

By *causality* Weber (1921/1978) simply meant the probability that an event will be followed or accompanied by another event. It was not, in his view, enough to look for historical constants, repetitions, analogies, and parallels, as many historians are content to do. Instead, the researcher has to look at the reasons for, as well as the meanings of, historical changes (Roth, 1971). Although Weber can be seen as having a one-way causal model—in contrast to Marx’s dialectical mode of reasoning—in his substantive sociology he was always attuned to the interrelationships among the economy, society, polity, organization, social stratification, religion, and so forth (Roth, 1968/1978). Thus, Weber operates with a multicausal approach in which “hosts of interactive influences are very often effective causal factors” (Kalberg, 1994:13).

Weber was quite clear on the issue of multiple causality in his study of the relationship between Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism. Although his work is sometimes interpreted differently, Weber (1904–1905/1958) simply argued that the Protestant ethic was one of the causal factors in the rise of the modern spirit of capitalism. He labeled as “foolish” the idea that Protestantism was the sole cause. Similarly foolish, in Weber’s view, was the idea that capitalism could have arisen “only” as a result of the Protestant Reformation; other factors could have led to the same result. Here is the way Weber made his point:

> We shall as far as possible clarify the manner and the general direction in which … the religious movements have influenced the development of material culture. Only when this has been determined with reasonable accuracy can the attempt be made to estimate to what extent the historical development of modern culture can be attributed to those religious forces and to what extent to others.


The critical thing to remember about Weber’s thinking on causality is his belief that because we can have a special understanding of social life (*verstehen*), the causal knowledge of the social sciences is different from the causal knowledge of the natural sciences. As Weber put it, “Meaningfully interpretable human conduct (‘action’) is identifiable by reference to ‘valuations’ and meanings. For this reason, our criteria for causal
explanation have a unique kind of satisfaction in the 'historical' explanation of such an ‘entity’" (1903–1906/1975:185). Thus, the causal knowledge of the social scientist is different from the causal knowledge of the natural scientist.

Weber’s thoughts on causality were intimately related to his efforts to come to grips with the conflict between nomothetic and idiographic knowledge. Those who subscribe to a nomothetic point of view would argue that there is a necessary relationship among social phenomena, whereas the supporters of an idiographic perspective would be inclined to see only random relationships among these entities. As usual, Weber took a middle position, epitomized in his concept of “adequate causality.” The notion of adequate causality adopts the view that the best we can do in sociology is make probabilistic statements about the relationship between social phenomena; that is, if $x$ occurs, then it is probable that $y$ will occur. The goal is to “estimate the degree to which a certain effect is ‘favoured’ by certain ‘conditions’” (Weber, 1903–1917/1949:183).

**Ideal Types**

The ideal type is one of Weber’s best-known contributions to contemporary sociology (Drysdale, 1996; Hekman, 1983; Lindbekk, 1992; McKinney, 1966; Zijderveld, 2005). As we have seen, Weber believed it was the responsibility of sociologists to develop conceptual tools, which could be used later by historians and sociologists. The most important such conceptual tool was the ideal type:

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct…. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct … cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality.

(Weber, 1903–1917/1949:90)

In spite of this definition, Weber was not totally consistent in the way he used the ideal type. To grasp what the concept means initially, we will have to overlook some of the inconsistencies. At its most basic level, an ideal type is a concept constructed by a social scientist, on the basis of his or her interests and theoretical orientation, to capture the essential features of some social phenomenon.

The most important thing about ideal types is that they are heuristic devices; they are to be useful and helpful in doing empirical research and in understanding a specific aspect of the social world (or a “historical individual”). As L. M. Lachman said, an ideal type is “essentially a measuring rod” (1971:26), or in Stephen Kalberg’s terms, a “yardstick” (1994:87). Here is the way Weber put it: “Its function is the comparison with empirical reality in order to establish its divergences or similarities, to describe them with the most unambiguously intelligible concepts, and to understand and explain them causally” (1903–1917/1949:43). For example, social scientists would construct an ideal-typical bureaucracy on the basis of their immersion in historical data. This ideal type can then be compared to actual bureaucracies. The researcher looks for
divergences in the real case from the exaggerated ideal type. Next, the social scientist must look for the causes of the deviations. Some typical reasons for these divergences are the following:

1. Actions of bureaucrats that are motivated by misinformation
2. Strategic errors, primarily by the bureaucratic leaders
3. Logical fallacies undergirding the actions of leaders and followers
4. Decisions made in the bureaucracy on the basis of emotion
5. Any irrationality in the action of bureaucratic leaders and followers

To take another example, an ideal-typical military battle delineates the principal components of such a battle—opposing armies, opposing strategies, matériel at the disposal of each, disputed land (“no-man’s land”), supply and support forces, command centers, and leadership qualities. Actual battles may not have all of these elements, and that is one thing a researcher wants to know. The basic point is that the elements of any particular military battle may be compared with the elements identified in the ideal type.

The elements of an ideal type (such as the components of the ideal-typical military battle) are not to be thrown together arbitrarily; they are combined on the basis of their compatibility. As Susan Hekman put it, “Ideal types are not the product of the whim or fancy of a social scientist, but are logically constructed concepts” (1983:32). (However, they can and should reflect the interests of the social scientist.)

In Weber’s view, the ideal type was to be derived inductively from the real world of social history. Weber did not believe that it was enough to offer a carefully defined set of concepts, especially if they were deductively derived from an abstract theory. The concepts had to be empirically adequate (Roth, 1971). Thus, to produce ideal types, researchers had to first immerse themselves in historical reality and then derive the types from that reality.

In line with Weber’s efforts to find a middle ground between nomothetic and idiographic knowledge, he argued that ideal types should be neither too general nor too specific. For example, in the case of religion he would reject ideal types of the history of religion in general, but he would also be critical of ideal types of very specific phenomena, such as an individual’s religious experience. Rather, ideal types are developed of intermediate phenomena such as Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism, and Baptism (Weber, 1904–1905/1958).

Although ideal types are to be derived from the real world, they are not to be mirror images of that world. Rather, they are to be one-sided exaggerations of the essence of what goes on in the real world. In Weber’s view, the more exaggerated the ideal type, the more useful it would be for historical research.

The use of the word ideal should not be construed to mean that the concept being described is in any sense the best of all possible worlds. As used by Weber, the term meant that the form described in the concept was rarely, if ever, found in the real world. In fact, Weber argued that the ideal type need not be positive or correct; it can just as easily be negative or even morally repugnant (1903–1917/1949).

Ideal types should make sense in themselves, the meaning of their components should be compatible, and they should aid us in making sense of the real world. Although we have come to think of ideal types as describing
static entities, Weber believed that they could describe either static or dynamic entities. Thus, we can have an ideal type of a structure, such as a bureaucracy, or of a social development, such as bureaucratization.

Ideal types also are not developed once and for all. Because society is constantly changing, and the interests of social scientists are as well, it is necessary to develop new typologies to fit the changing reality. This is in line with Weber's view that there can be no timeless concepts in the social sciences (Roth, 1968/1978).

Although we have presented a relatively unambiguous image of the ideal type, there are contradictions in the way Weber defined the concept. In addition, in his own substantive work, Weber used the ideal type in ways that differed from the ways he said it was to be used. As Burger noted, "The ideal types presented in Economy and Society are a mixture of definitions, classification, and specific hypotheses seemingly too divergent to be reconcilable with Weber's statements" (1976:118). Although Hekman disagreed with Burger on Weber's inconsistency in defining ideal types, she (1983:38–59) also recognized that Weber offered several varieties of ideal types:

1. **Historical ideal types.** These relate to phenomena found in some particular historical epoch (e.g., the modern capitalistic marketplace).
2. **General sociological ideal types.** These relate to phenomena that cut across a number of historical periods and societies (e.g., bureaucracy).
3. **Action ideal types.** These are pure types of action based on the motivations of the actor (e.g., affectual action).
4. **Structural ideal types.** These are forms taken by the causes and consequences of social action (e.g., traditional domination).

Clearly Weber developed an array of varieties of ideal types, and some of the richness in his work stems from their diversity, although common to them all is their mode of construction.

Kalberg (1994) argued that although the heuristic use of ideal types in empirical research is important, it should not be forgotten that they also play a key theoretical role in Weber's work. Although Weber rejected the idea of theoretical laws, he used ideal types in various ways to create theoretical models. Thus, ideal types constitute the theoretical building blocks for the construction of a variety of theoretical models (for example, the routinization of charisma and the rationalization of society, both of which are discussed later in this chapter), and these models are then used to analyze specific historical developments.

**Values**

Modern sociological thinking in America on the role of values in the social sciences has been shaped to a large degree by an interpretation, often simplistic and erroneous, of Weber's notion of value-free sociology (Hennis, 1994; McFalls, 2007). A common perception of Weber's view is that social scientists should not let their personal values influence their scientific research in any way. Weber's work on values is far more complicated and should not be reduced to the simplistic notion that values should be kept out of sociology (Tribe, 1989:3).

**Values and Teaching**
Weber was most clear about the need for teachers to control their personal values in the classroom. From his point of view, academicians have a perfect right to express their personal values freely in speeches, in the press, and so forth, but the academic lecture hall is different. Weber was opposed to those teachers who preached “their evaluations on ultimate questions ‘in the name of science’ in governmentally privileged lecture halls in which they are neither controlled, checked by discussion, nor subject to contradiction…. The lecture hall should be held separate from the arena of public discussion” (Weber, 1903–1917/1949:4). The most important difference between a public speech and an academic lecture lies in the nature of the audience. A crowd watching a public speaker has chosen to be there and can leave at any time. But students, if they want to succeed, have little choice but to listen attentively to their professor’s value-laden positions. There is little ambiguity in this aspect of Weber’s position on value-freedom. The academician is to express “facts,” not personal values, in the classroom. Although teachers may be tempted to insert values because they make a course more interesting, teachers should be wary of employing values, because such values will “weaken the students’ taste for sober empirical analysis” (9). The only question is whether it is realistic to think that professors can eliminate most values from their presentations. Weber adopted this position because he believed it is possible to separate fact and value. However, Marx would disagree because, in his view, fact and value are intertwined, dialectically interrelated.

Values and Research

Weber’s position on the place of values in social research is far more ambiguous. Weber believed in the ability to separate fact from value, and this view could be extended to the research world: “Investigator and teacher should keep unconditionally separate the establishment of empirical facts … and his own personal evaluations, i.e., his evaluation of these facts as satisfactory or unsatisfactory” (1903–1917/1949:11). He often differentiated between existential knowledge of what is and normative knowledge of what ought to be (Weber, 1903–1917/1949). For example, on the founding of the German Sociological Society, he said: “The Association rejects, in principle and definitely, all propaganda for action-oriented ideas from its midst.” Instead, the association was pointed in the direction of the study of “what is, why something is the way it is, for what historical and social reasons” (Roth, 1968/1978:lx).

However, several facts point in a different direction and show that despite the evidence described, Weber did not operate with the simplistic view that values should be totally eliminated from social research. Whereas Weber perceived a role for values in a specific aspect of the research process, he thought that they should be kept out of the actual collection of research data. By this Weber meant that we should employ the regular procedures of scientific investigation, such as accurate observation and systematic comparison. Values are to be restricted to the time before social research begins. They should shape the selection of what we choose to study. Weber’s (1903–1917/1949:21) ideas on the role of values prior to social research are captured in his concept of value-relevance. As with many of Weber’s methodological concepts, value-relevance is derived from the work of the German historicist Heinrich Rickert, for whom it involved “a selection of those parts of empirical reality which for human beings embody one or several of those general cultural values which are held by people in the society in which the scientific observers live” (Burger, 1976:36). In historical
research, this would mean that the choice of objects to study would be made on the basis of what is considered important in the particular society in which the researchers live. That is, they choose what to study of the past on the basis of the contemporary value system. In his specific case, Weber wrote of value-relevance from the "standpoint of the interests of the modern European" (1903–1917/1949:30). For example, bureaucracy was a very important part of the German society of Weber’s time, and he chose, as a result, to study that phenomenon (or the lack of it) in various historical settings.

Thus, to Weber, value judgments are not to be withdrawn completely from scientific discourse. Although Weber was opposed to confusing fact and value, he did not believe that values should be excised from the social sciences: “An attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific 'objectivity'" (1903–1917/1949:60). He was prepared to admit that values have a certain place, though he warned researchers to be careful about the role of values: “It should be constantly made clear … exactly at which point the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting person begins to speak” (60). When expressing value positions, sociological researchers must always keep themselves and their audiences aware of those positions. There is a gap between what Weber said and what he actually did. Weber was not afraid to express a value judgment, even in the midst of the analysis of historical data. For example, he said that the Roman state suffered from a convulsive sickness of its social body. It can be argued that in Weber’s actual work values not only were a basic device for selecting subjects to study but also were involved in the acquisition of meaningful knowledge of the social world. Gary Abraham (1992) has made the point that Weber’s work, especially his views on Judaism as a world religion, was distorted by his values. In his sociology of religion (discussed later in this chapter), Weber termed the Jews “pariah people.” Weber traced this position of outsider more to the desire of Jews to segregate themselves than to their exclusion by the rest of society. Accepting the general view of the day, Weber argued that Jews would need to surrender Judaism in order to be assimilated into German society. Abraham argued that this sort of bias affected not only Weber’s ideas on Judaism but his work in general. This casts further doubt on Weber as a “value-free” sociologist, as well as on the conventional view of Weber as a liberal thinker. As Abraham wrote, “Max Weber was probably as close to tolerant liberalism as majority Germany could offer at the time” (1992:22). Weber was more of a nationalist supporting the assimilation of minority groups than he was a classical liberal favoring pluralism, and those values had a profound effect on his work (Roth, 2000).

Most American sociologists regard Weber as an exponent of value-free sociology. The truth is that most American sociologists subscribe to the idea of value-freedom, and they find it useful to invoke Weber’s name in support of their position. As we have seen, however, Weber’s work is studded with values.

Another aspect of Weber’s work on values worth noting is his ideas on the role of the social sciences in helping people make choices among various ultimate value positions. Basically, Weber’s view is that there is no way of scientifically choosing among alternative value positions. Thus, social scientists cannot presume to make such choices for people. “The social sciences, which are strictly empirical sciences, are the least fitted to presume to save the individual the difficulty of making a choice” (Weber, 1903–1917/1949:19). The social scientist can derive certain factual conclusions from social research, but this research cannot tell people what
they “ought” to do. Empirical research can help people choose an adequate means to an end, but it cannot help them choose that end as opposed to other ends. Weber wrote, “It can never be the task of an empirical science to provide binding norms and ideals from which directions for immediate practical activity can be derived” (52).
Substantive Sociology

We turn now to Weber’s substantive sociology. We begin, as did Weber in his monumental *Economy and Society*, at the levels of action and interaction, but we will soon encounter the basic paradox in Weber’s work: despite his seeming commitment to a sociology of small-scale processes, his work is primarily at the large-scale levels of the social world. (Many Weberians would disagree with this portrayal of paradox in Weber’s work. Kalberg [1994], e.g., argued that Weber offered a more fully integrated micro-macro, or agency-structure, theory.)

What Is Sociology?

In articulating his view on sociology, Weber often took a stance against the large-scale evolutionary sociology, the organicism, that was preeminent in the field at the time. For example, Weber said, “I became one [a sociologist] in order to put an end to collectivist notions. In other words, sociology, too, can only be practiced by proceeding from the action of one or more, few or many, individuals, that means, by employing a strictly ‘individualist’ method” (Roth, 1976:306). Despite his stated adherence to an “individualist” method, Weber was forced to admit that it is impossible to eliminate totally collective ideas from sociology.2 But even when he admitted the significance of collective concepts, Weber ultimately reduced them to patterns and regularities of individual action: “For the subjective interpretation of action in sociological work these collectivities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action” (1921/1978:13).

At the individual level, Weber was deeply concerned with meaning and the way in which it was formed. There seems little doubt that Weber believed in, and intended to undertake, a microsociology. But is that, in fact, what he did? Mary Fulbrook directly addressed the discontinuity in Weber’s work:

Weber’s overt emphasis on the importance of [individual] meanings and motives in causal explanation of social action does not correspond adequately with the true mode of explanation involved in his comparative-historical studies of the world religions. Rather, the ultimate level of causal explanation in Weber’s substantive writings is that of the social-structural conditions under which certain forms of meaning and motivation can achieve historical efficacy.

(Fulbrook, 1978:71)

Lars Udehn (1981) has cast light on this problem in interpreting Weber’s work by distinguishing between Weber’s methodology and his substantive concerns and recognizing that there is a conflict or tension between them. In Udehn’s view, Weber used an “individualist and subjectivist methodology” (1981:131). In terms of the latter, Weber was interested in what individuals do and why they do it (their subjective motives). In the former, Weber was interested in reducing collectivities to the actions of individuals. However, in most of his
substantive sociology (as we will see), Weber focused on large-scale structure (such as bureaucracy or capitalism) and is not focally concerned with what individuals do or why they do it. Such structures are not reduced by Weber to the actions of individuals, and the actions of those in them are determined by the structures, not by their motives. There is little doubt that there is an enormous contradiction in Weber’s work, and we address this through much of this chapter.

With this as background, we are now ready for Weber’s definition of sociology: “Sociology … is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences” (1921/1978:4; italics added). Among the themes discussed earlier that are mentioned or implied in this definition are the following:

Sociology should be a science.
Sociology should be concerned with causality. (Here, apparently, Weber was combining sociology and history.)
Sociology should utilize interpretive understanding (verstehen).

We are now ready to discuss what Weber meant by social action.

Social Action

Weber’s entire sociology, if we accept his words at face value, was based on his conception of social action (S. Turner, 1983). He differentiated between action and purely reactive behavior. The concept of behavior is reserved, then as now, for automatic behavior that involves no thought processes. A stimulus is presented and behavior occurs, with little intervening between stimulus and response. Such behavior was not of interest in Weber’s sociology. He was concerned with action that clearly involved the intervention of thought processes (and the resulting meaningful action) between the occurrence of a stimulus and the ultimate response. To put it slightly differently, action was said to occur when individuals attached subjective meanings to their action. To Weber, the task of sociological analysis involved “the interpretation of action in terms of its subjective meaning” (1921/1978:8). A good, and more specific, example of Weber’s thinking on action is found in his discussion of economic action, which he defined as “a conscious, primary orientation to economic consideration … for what matters is not the objective necessity of making economic provision, but the belief that it is necessary” (64).

In embedding his analysis in mental processes and the resulting meaningful action, Weber (1921/1978) was careful to point out that it is erroneous to regard psychology as the foundation of the sociological interpretation of action. Weber seemed to be making essentially the same point made by Durkheim in discussing at least some nonmaterial social facts. That is, sociologists are interested in mental processes, but this is not the same as psychologists’ interest in the mind, personality, and so forth.

Although Weber implied that he had a great concern with mental processes, he actually spent little time on
them. Schutz (1932/1967) was correct when he pointed out that although Weber’s work on mental processes is suggestive, it is hardly the basis for a systematic microsociology. But it was the suggestiveness of Weber’s work that made him relevant to those who developed theories of individuals and their behavior—symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and so forth.

In his action theory, Weber’s clear intent was to focus on individuals and patterns and regularities of action and not on the collectivity. “Action in the sense of subjectively understandable orientation of behavior exists only as the behavior of one or more individual human beings” (Weber, 1921/1978:13). Weber was prepared to admit that for some purposes we may have to treat collectivities as individuals, “but for the subjective interpretation of action in sociological work these collectivities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action” (13). It would seem that Weber could hardly be more explicit: the sociology of action is ultimately concerned with individuals, not collectivities.

Weber utilized his ideal-type methodology to clarify the meaning of action by identifying four basic types of action. Not only is this typology significant for understanding what Weber meant by action, but it is also, in part, the basis for Weber’s concern with larger social structures and institutions. Of greatest importance is Weber’s differentiation between the two basic types of rational action. The first is means–ends rationality, or action that is “determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as ‘conditions’ or ‘means’ for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends” (Weber, 1921/1978:24). The second is value rationality, or action that is “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects for success” (24–25). Affectual action (which was of little concern to Weber) is determined by the emotional state of the actor. Traditional action (which was of far greater concern to Weber) is determined by the actor’s habitual and customary ways of behaving.

It should be noted that although Weber differentiated four ideal-typical forms of action, he was well aware that any given action usually involves a combination of all four ideal types of action. In addition, Weber argued that sociologists have a much better chance of understanding action of the more rational variety than they do of understanding action dominated by affect or tradition.

We turn now to Weber’s thoughts on social stratification, or his famous ideas on class, status, and party (or power). His analysis of stratification is one area in which Weber operated, at least at first, as an action theorist.

**Class, Status, and Party**

One important aspect of this analysis is that Weber refused to reduce stratification to economic factors (or class, in Weber’s terminology) but saw it as multidimensional. Thus, society is stratified on the bases of economics, status, and power. One resulting implication is that people can rank high on one or two of these dimensions of stratification and low on the other (or others), permitting a far more sophisticated analysis of social stratification than is possible when stratification is simply reduced (as it was by some Marxists) to
variations in one’s economic situation.

Starting with class, Weber adhered to his action orientation by arguing that a class is not a community. Rather, a class is a group of people whose shared situation is a possible, and sometimes frequent, basis for action by the group (K. Smith, 2007). Weber contends that a “class situation” exists when three conditions are met:

(1) A number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, insofar as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. This is “class situation.”

(Weber, 1921/1978:927)

The concept of “class” refers to any group of people found in the same class situation. Thus, a class is not a community but merely a group of people in the same economic, or market, situation.

In contrast to class, status groups are ordinarily communities, albeit rather amorphous ones. “Status situation” is defined by Weber as “every typical component of the life of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor” (1921/1978:932). As a general rule, status is associated with a style of life. (Status relates to consumption of goods produced, whereas class relates to economic production.) Those at the top of the status hierarchy have a different lifestyle than do those at the bottom. In this case, lifestyle, or status, is related to class situation. But class and status are not necessarily linked to one another: “Money and an entrepreneurial position are not in themselves status qualifications, although they may lead to them; and the lack of property is not in itself a status disqualification, although this may be a reason for it” (306). There is a complex set of relationships between class and status, and it is made even more complicated when we add the dimension of party.

Whereas classes exist in the economic order and status groups in the social order, parties can be found in the political order. To Weber, parties “are always structures struggling for domination” (cited in Gerth and Mills, 1958:195; italics added). Thus, parties are the most organized elements of Weber’s stratification system. Weber thought of parties very broadly as including not only those that exist in the state but also those that may exist in a social club. Parties usually, but not always, represent class or status groups. Whatever they represent, parties are oriented to the attainment of power.

Although Weber remained close to his action approach in his ideas on social stratification, these ideas already indicate a movement in the direction of macro-level communities and structures. In most of his other work, Weber focused on such large-scale units of analysis. It is not that Weber lost sight of the action; the actor simply moved from being the focus of his concern to being largely a dependent variable determined by a variety of large-scale forces. For example, Weber believed that individual Calvinists are impelled to act in various ways by the norms, values, and beliefs of their religion, but his focus was not on the individual but on
the collective forces that impel the actor.

Structures of Authority

Weber’s sociological interest in the structures of authority was motivated, at least in part, by his political interests (Eliaeson, 2000). Weber was no political radical; in fact, he was often called the “bourgeois Marx” to reflect the similarities in the intellectual interests of Marx and Weber as well as their very different political orientations. Although Weber was almost as critical of modern capitalism as Marx was, he did not advocate revolution. He wanted to change society gradually, not overthrow it. He had little faith in the ability of the masses to create a “better” society. But Weber also saw little hope in the middle classes, which he felt were dominated by shortsighted, petty bureaucrats. Weber was critical of authoritarian political leaders like Bismarck. Nevertheless, for Weber the hope—if indeed he had any hope—lay with the great political leaders rather than with the masses or the bureaucrats. Along with his faith in political leaders went his unswerving nationalism. He placed the nation above all else: “The vital interests of the nation stand, of course, above democracy and parliamentarianism” (Weber, 1921/1978:1383). Weber preferred democracy as a political form not because he believed in the masses but because it offered maximum dynamism and the best milieu to generate political leaders (Mommsen, 1974). Weber noted that authority structures exist in every social institution, and his political views were related to his analysis of these structures in all settings. Of course, they were most relevant to his views on the polity.

Weber began his analysis of authority structures in a way that was consistent with his assumptions about the nature of action. He defined domination as the “probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons” (Weber, 1921/1978:212). Domination can have a variety of bases, legitimate as well as illegitimate, but what mainly interested Weber were the legitimate forms of domination, or what he called authority (Leggewie, 2005). What concerned Weber, and what played a central role in much of his sociology, were the three bases on which authority is made legitimate to followers—rational, traditional, and charismatic. In defining these three bases, Weber remained fairly close to his ideas on individual action, but he rapidly moved to the large-scale structures of authority.

Authority legitimized on rational grounds rests “on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands” (Weber, 1921/1978:215). Authority legitimized on traditional grounds is based on “an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them” (215). Finally, authority legitimized by charisma rests on the devotion of followers to the exceptional sanctity, exemplary character, heroism, or special powers (e.g., the ability to work miracles) of leaders, as well as on the normative order sanctioned by them. All of these modes of legitimizing authority clearly imply individual actors, thought processes (beliefs), and actions. But from this point, Weber, in his thinking about authority, moved quite far from an individual action base, as we will see when we discuss the authority structures erected on the basis of these types of legitimacy.

Rational-Legal Authority

Rational-legal authority can take a variety of structural forms, but the form that most interested Weber was
bureaucracy, which he considered “the purest type of exercise of legal authority” (1921/1978:220).

Ideal-Typical Bureaucracy Weber depicted bureaucracies in ideal-typical terms:

From a purely technical point of view, a bureaucracy is capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency, and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings. It is superior to any other form in precision, in stability, in the stringency of its discipline, and in its reliability. It thus makes possible a particularly high degree of calculability of results for the heads of the organization and for those acting in relation to it. It is finally superior both in intensive efficiency and in the scope of its operations and is formally capable of application to all kinds of administrative tasks. 

(Weber, 1921/1978:223)

Despite his discussion of the positive characteristics of bureaucracies, here and elsewhere in his work, there is a fundamental ambivalence in his attitude toward them. Although he detailed their advantages, he was well aware of their problems. Weber expressed various reservations about bureaucratic organizations. For example, he was cognizant of the “red tape” that often makes dealing with bureaucracies so trying and so difficult. His major fear, however, was that the rationalization that dominates all aspects of bureaucratic life was a threat to individual liberty:

No machinery in the world functions so precisely as this apparatus of men and, moreover, so cheaply…. Rational calculation … reduces every worker to a cog in this bureaucratic machine and, seeing himself in this light, he will merely ask how to transform himself into a somewhat bigger cog…. The passion for bureaucratization drives us to despair.

(Weber, 1921/1978:l iii)

Weber was appalled by the effects of bureaucratization and, more generally, of the rationalization of the world of which bureaucratization is but one component, but he saw no way out. He described bureaucracies as “escape proof,” “practically unshatterable,” and among the hardest institutions to destroy once they are established. Along the same lines, he felt that individual bureaucrats could not “squirm out” of the bureaucracy once they were “harnessed” in it. (For a less ominous view of bureaucratization, see Klagge, 1997). Weber concluded that “the future belongs to bureaucratization” (1921/1978:1401), and time has borne out his prediction.

Weber would say that his depiction of the advantages of bureaucracy is part of his ideal-typical image of the way it operates. The ideal-typical bureaucracy is a purposeful exaggeration of the rational characteristics of bureaucracies. Such an exaggerated model is useful for heuristic purposes and for studies of organizations in the real world, but it is not to be mistaken for a realistic depiction of the way bureaucracies actually operate.
Weber distinguished the ideal-typical bureaucracy from the ideal-typical bureaucrat. He conceived of bureaucracies as structures and of bureaucrats as positions within those structures. He did not, as his action orientation might lead us to expect, offer a social psychology of organizations or of the individuals who inhabit those bureaucracies (as modern symbolic interactionists might).

The ideal-typical bureaucracy is a type of organization. Its basic units are offices organized in a hierarchical manner with rules, functions, written documents, and means of compulsion. All of these are, to varying degrees, large-scale structures that represent the thrust of Weber’s thinking. After all, he could have constructed an ideal-typical bureaucracy that focused on the thoughts and actions of individuals within the bureaucracy. There is a whole school of thought in the study of organizations that focuses precisely on this level rather than on the structures of bureaucracies (see, e.g., Blankenship, 1977).

The following are the major characteristics of the ideal-typical bureaucracy:

1. It consists of a continuous organization of official functions (offices) bound by rules.
2. Each office has a specified sphere of competence. The office carries with it a set of obligations to perform various functions, the authority to carry out these functions, and the means of compulsion required to do the job.
3. The offices are organized into a hierarchical system.
4. The offices may carry with them technical qualifications that require that the participants obtain suitable training.
5. The staff that fills these offices does not own the means of production associated with them; staff members are provided with the use of those things that they need to do the job.
6. The incumbent is not allowed to appropriate the position; it always remains part of the organization.
7. Administrative acts, decisions, and rules are formulated and recorded in writing.

Any Alternatives?

A bureaucracy is one of the rational structures that is playing an ever-increasing role in modern society, but one may wonder whether there is any alternative to the bureaucratic structure. Weber’s clear and unequivocal answer was that there is no possible alternative: “The needs of mass administration make it today completely indispensable. The choice is only between bureaucracy and dilettantism in the field of administration” (1921/1978:223).

Although we might admit that bureaucracy is an intrinsic part of modern capitalism, we might ask whether a socialist society could be different. Is it possible to create a socialist society without bureaucracies and bureaucrats? Once again, Weber was unequivocal: “When those subject to bureaucratic control seek to escape the influence of existing bureaucratic apparatus, this is normally possible only by creating an organization of their own which is equally subject to the process of bureaucratization” (1921/1978:224). In fact, Weber believed that in the case of socialism, we would see an increase, not a decrease, in bureaucratization. If socialism were to achieve a level of efficiency comparable to capitalism, “it would mean a tremendous increase in the importance of professional bureaucrats” (224). In capitalism, at least the owners are not bureaucrats and
therefore would be able to restrain the bureaucrats, but in socialism, even the top-level leaders would be bureaucrats. Weber thus believed that even with its problems “capitalism presented the best chances for the preservation of individual freedom and creative leadership in a bureaucratic world” (Mommsen, 1974:xv). We are once again at a key theme in Weber’s work: his view that there is really no hope for a better world. Socialists can, in Weber’s view, only make things worse by expanding the degree of bureaucratization in society. Weber noted, “Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now” (cited in Gerth and Mills, 1958:128).

Any Hope?

A ray of hope in Weber’s work—and it is a small one—is that professionals who stand outside the bureaucratic system can control it to some degree. In this category, Weber included professional politicians, scientists, intellectuals (Sadri, 1992), and even capitalists, as well as the supreme heads of the bureaucracies. For example, Weber said that politicians “must be the countervailing force against bureaucratic domination” (1921/1978:1417). His famous essay “Politics as a Vocation” is basically a plea for the development of political leaders with a calling to oppose the rule of bureaucracies and of bureaucrats. But in the end these appear to be rather feeble hopes. In fact, a good case can be made that these professionals are simply another aspect of the rationalization process and that their development serves only to accelerate that process (Nass, 1986; Ritzer, 1975c; Ritzer and Walczak, 1988).

Traditional Authority

Whereas rational-legal authority stems from the legitimacy of a rational-legal system, traditional authority is based on a claim by the leaders, and a belief on the part of the followers, that there is virtue in the sanctity of age-old rules and powers. The leader in such a system is not a superior but a personal master. The administrative staff, if any, consists not of officials but mainly of personal retainers. In Weber’s words, “Personal loyalty, not the official's impersonal duty, determines the relations of the administrative staff to the master” (1921/1978:227). Although the bureaucratic staff owes its allegiance and obedience to enacted rules and to the leader, who acts in their name, the staff of the traditional leader obeys because the leader carries the weight of tradition—he or she has been chosen for that position in the traditional manner.

Weber was interested in the staff of the traditional leader and how it measured up to the ideal-typical bureaucratic staff. He concluded that it was lacking on a number of counts. The traditional staff lacks offices with clearly defined spheres of competence that are subject to impersonal rules. It also does not have a rational ordering of relations of superiority and inferiority; it lacks a clear hierarchy. There is no regular system of appointment and promotion on the basis of free contracts. Technical training is not a regular requirement for obtaining a position or an appointment. Appointments do not carry with them fixed salaries paid in money.

Weber also used his ideal-type methodology to analyze historically the different forms of traditional authority. He differentiated between two very early forms of traditional authority. A gerontocracy involves rule by elders, whereas primary patriarchalism involves leaders who inherit their positions. Both of these forms have a supreme chief but lack an administrative staff. A more modern form is patrimonialism, which is traditional
domination with an administration and a military force that are purely personal instruments of the master (Andrew Eisenberg, 1998). Still more modern is feudalism, which limits the discretion of the master through the development of more routinized, even contractual, relationships between leader and subordinate. This restraint, in turn, leads to more stabilized power positions than exist in patrimonialism. All four of these forms may be seen as structural variations of traditional authority, and all of them differ significantly from rational-legal authority.

Weber saw structures of traditional authority, in any form, as barriers to the development of rationality. This is our first encounter with an overriding theme in Weber's work—factors that facilitate or impede the development of (formal) rationality. Over and over we find Weber concerned, as he was here, with the structural factors conducive to rationality in the Western world and the structural and cultural impediments to the development of a similar rationality throughout the rest of the world. In this specific case, Weber argued that the structures and practices of traditional authority constitute a barrier to the rise of rational economic structures—in particular, capitalism—as well as to various other components of a rational society. Even patrimonialism—a more modern form of traditionalism—while permitting the development of certain forms of “primitive” capitalism, does not allow for the rise of the highly rational type of capitalism characteristic of the modern West.

Charismatic Authority

Charisma is a concept that has come to be used very broadly (Adair-Toteff, 2005; L. Oakes, 1997; S. Turner, 2003; Werbner and Basu, 1998). The news media and the general public are quick to point to a politician, a movie star, or a rock musician as a charismatic individual. By this they most often mean that the person in question is endowed with extraordinary qualities. The concept of charisma plays an important role in the work of Max Weber, but his conception of it was very different from that held by most laypeople today. Although Weber did not deny that a charismatic leader may have outstanding characteristics, his sense of charisma was more dependent on the group of disciples and the way that they define the charismatic leader (D. N. Smith, 1998). To put Weber's position bluntly, if the disciples define a leader as charismatic, then he or she is likely to be a charismatic leader irrespective of whether he or she actually possesses any outstanding traits. A charismatic leader, then, can be someone who is quite ordinary. What is crucial is the process by which such a leader is set apart from ordinary people and treated as if endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or qualities that are not accessible to the ordinary person (Miyahara, 1983).

Charisma and Revolution

To Weber, charisma was a revolutionary force, one of the most important revolutionary forces in the social world. Whereas traditional authority clearly is inherently conservative, the rise of a charismatic leader may well pose a threat to that system (as well as to a rational-legal system) and lead to a dramatic change in that system. What distinguishes charisma as a revolutionary force is that it leads to changes in the minds of actors; it causes a “subjective or internal reorientation.” Such changes may lead to “a radical alteration of the central attitudes and direction of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward different problems of the world” (Weber, 1921/1978:245). Although Weber was here addressing changes in the thoughts and
actions of individuals, such changes are clearly reduced to the status of dependent variables. Weber focused on changes in the structure of authority, that is, the rise of charismatic authority. When such a new authority structure emerges, it is likely to change people’s thoughts and actions dramatically.

The other major revolutionary force in Weber’s theoretical system, and the one with which he was much more concerned, is (formal) rationality. Whereas charisma is an internal revolutionary force that changes the minds of actors, Weber saw (formal) rationality as an external revolutionary force changing the structures of society first and then ultimately the thoughts and actions of individuals. There is more to be said about rationality as a revolutionary force later, but this closes the discussion of charisma as a revolutionary factor because Weber had very little to say about it.

Charismatic Organizations and the Routinization of Charisma

In his analysis of charisma, Weber began, as he did with traditional authority, with the ideal-typical bureaucracy. He sought to determine to what degree the structure of charismatic authority, with its disciples and staff, differs from the bureaucratic system. Compared to that of the ideal-typical bureaucracy, the staff of the charismatic leader is lacking on virtually all counts. The staff members are not technically trained but are chosen instead for their possession of charismatic qualities or, at least, of qualities similar to those possessed by the charismatic leader. The offices they occupy form no clear hierarchy. Their work does not constitute a career, and there are no promotions, clear appointments, or dismissals. The charismatic leader is free to intervene whenever he or she feels that the staff cannot handle a situation. The organization has no formal rules, no established administrative organs, and no precedents to guide new judgments. In these and other ways, Weber found the staff of the charismatic leader to be “greatly inferior” to the staff in a bureaucratic form of organization.

Weber’s interest in the organization behind the charismatic leader and the staff that inhabits it led him to the question of what happens to charismatic authority when the leader dies. After all, a charismatic system is inherently fragile; it would seem to be able to survive only as long as the charismatic leader lives. But is it possible for such an organization to live after the leader dies? The answer to this question is of the greatest consequence to the staff members of the charismatic leader, for they are likely to live on after the leader dies. They are also likely to have a vested interest in the continued existence of the organization: if the organization ceases to exist, they are out of work. Thus, the challenge for the staff is to create a situation in which charisma in some adulterated form persists even after the leader’s death. It is a difficult struggle because, for Weber, charisma is by its nature unstable; it exists in its pure form only as long as the charismatic leader lives.

To cope with the departure of the charismatic leader, the staff (as well as the followers) may adopt a variety of strategies to create a more lasting organization. The staff may search for a new charismatic leader, but even if the search is successful, the new leader is unlikely to have the same aura as his or her predecessor. A set of rules also may be developed that allows the group to identify future charismatic leaders. But such rules rapidly become tradition, and what was charismatic leadership is on the way toward becoming traditional authority. In any case, the nature of leadership is radically changed as the purely personal character of charisma is eliminated. Still another technique is to allow the charismatic leader to designate his or her successor and
thereby to transfer charisma symbolically to the next in line. Again it is questionable whether this is ever very successful or whether it can be successful in the long run. Another strategy is having the staff designate a successor and having its choice accepted by the larger community. The staff could also create ritual tests, with the new charismatic leader being the one who successfully undergoes the tests. However, all of these efforts are doomed to failure. In the long run, charisma cannot be routinized and still be charisma; it must be transformed into either traditional or rational-legal authority (or into some sort of institutionalized charisma like the Catholic Church).

Indeed, we find a basic theory of history in Weber’s work. If successful, charisma almost immediately moves in the direction of routinization. But once routinized, charisma is en route to becoming either traditional or rational-legal authority. Once it achieves one of those states, the stage is set for the cycle to begin all over again. However, despite a general adherence to a cyclical theory, Weber believed that a basic change has occurred in the modern world and that we are more and more likely to see charisma routinized in the direction of rational-legal authority. Furthermore, he saw rational systems of authority as stronger and as increasingly impervious to charismatic movements. The modern, rationalized world may well mean the death of charisma as a significant revolutionary force (Seligman, 1993). Weber contended that rationality—not charisma—is the most irresistible and important revolutionary force in the modern world.

**Types of Authority and the “Real World”**

In this section, the three types of authority are discussed as ideal types, but Weber was well aware that in the real world, any specific form of authority involves a combination of all three. Thus, we can think of Franklin D. Roosevelt as a president of the United States who ruled on all three bases. He was elected president in accordance with a series of rational-legal principles. By the time he was elected president for the fourth time, a good part of this rule had traditional elements. Finally, many disciples and followers regarded him as a charismatic leader (McCann, 1997).

Although the three forms of authority are presented here as parallel structures, in the real world there is constant tension and, sometimes, conflict among them. The charismatic leader is a constant threat to the other forms of authority. Once in power, the charismatic leader must address the threat posed to him or her by the other two forms. Even if charismatic authority is successfully routinized, there then arises the problem of maintaining its dynamism and its original revolutionary qualities. Then there is the conflict produced by the constant development of rational-legal authority and the threat it poses to the continued existence of the other forms. If Weber was right, however, we might face a future in which the tension among the three forms of authority is eliminated, a world of the uncontested hegemony of the rational-legal system. This is the “iron cage” of a totally rationalized society that worried Weber so much. In such a society, the only hope lies with isolated charismatic individuals who manage somehow to avoid the coercive power of society. But a small number of isolated individuals hardly represent a significant hope in the face of an increasingly powerful bureaucratic machine.

**Rationalization**
Many scholars have realized that rationalization lies at the heart of Weber’s substantive sociology (Brubaker, 1984; R. Collins, 1980; Eisen, 1978; Kalberg, 1980, 1990, 2011a; D. Levine, 1981a; Ritzer, 2015; Scaff, 1989, 2005; Schluchter, 1981; Sica, 1988). As Kalberg put it, “It is the case that Weber’s interest in a broad and overarching theme—the ‘specific and peculiar “rationalism” of Western culture’ and its unique origins and development—stands at the center of his sociology” (1994:18). However, it is difficult to extract a clear definition of rationalization from Weber’s work. In fact, Weber operated with a number of different definitions of the term, and he often failed to specify which definition he was using in a particular discussion (Brubaker, 1984:1). As we saw earlier, Weber did define rationality; indeed, he differentiated between two types—means–ends rationality and value rationality. However, these concepts refer to types of action. They are the basis of, but not coterminous with, Weber’s large-scale sense of rationalization. Weber was interested in far more than fragmented action orientations; his main concern was with regularities and patterns of action within civilizations, institutions, organizations, strata, classes, and groups. Donald Levine (1981a) argued that Weber was interested in “objectified” rationality, that is, action that is in accord with some process of external systematization. Kalberg (1980) performed a useful service by identifying four basic types of (“objective”) rationality in Weber’s work. (Levine offered a very similar differentiation.) These types of rationality were “the basic heuristic tools [Weber] employed to scrutinize the historical fates of rationalization as sociocultural processes” (Kalberg, 1980:1172; for an application, see Takayama, 1998).

**Types of Rationality**

The first type is practical rationality, which is defined by Kalberg as “every way of life that views and judges worldly activity in relation to the individual’s purely pragmatic and egoistic interests” (1980:1151). People who practice practical rationality accept given realities and merely calculate the most expedient ways of dealing with the difficulties that they present. This type of rationality arose with the severing of the bonds of primitive magic, and it exists trans-civilizationally and trans-historically; that is, it is not restricted to the modern Occident. This type of rationality stands in opposition to anything that threatens to transcend everyday routine. It leads people to distrust all impractical values, either religious or secular-utopian, as well as the theoretical rationality of the intellectuals, the type of rationality to which we now turn.

Theoretical rationality involves a cognitive effort to master reality through increasingly abstract concepts rather than through action. It involves such abstract cognitive processes as logical deduction, induction, attribution of causality, and the like. This type of rationality was accomplished early in history by sorcerers and ritualistic priests and later by philosophers, judges, and scientists. Unlike practical rationality, theoretical rationality leads the actor to transcend daily realities in a quest to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos. Like practical rationality, it is trans-civilizational and trans-historical. The effect of intellectual rationality on action is limited. In that it involves cognitive processes, it need not affect action taken, and it has the potential to introduce new patterns of action only indirectly.

Substantive rationality (similar to practical rationality but unlike theoretical rationality) directly orders action into patterns through clusters of values. Substantive rationality involves a choice of means to ends within the context of a system of values. One value system is no more (substantively) rational than another. Thus, this
type of rationality also exists trans-civilizationally and trans-historically, wherever consistent value postulates exist.

Finally, and most important from Kalberg’s point of view, is formal rationality, which involves means–ends calculation (Cockerham, Abel, and Luschen, 1993). But whereas in practical rationality this calculation occurs in reference to pragmatic self-interests, in formal rationality it occurs with reference to “universally applied rules, laws, and regulations.” As Brubaker puts it, “Common to the rationality of industrial capitalism, formalistic law and bureaucratic administration is its objectified, institutionalized, supra-individual form; in each sphere, rationality is embodied in the social structure and confronts individuals as something external to them” (1984:9). Weber makes this quite clear in the specific case of bureaucratic rationalization:

Bureaucratic rationalization … revolutionizes with technical means, in principle, as does every economic reorganization, “from without”: It first changes the material and social orders, and through them the people, by changing the conditions of adaptation, and perhaps the opportunities for adaptation, through a rational determination of means and ends.

(Weber, 1921/1978:1116)

Although all the other types of rationality are trans-civilizational and epoch-transcending, formal rationality arose only in the West with the coming of industrialization. The universally applied rules, laws, and regulations that characterize formal rationality in the West are found particularly in the economic, legal, and scientific institutions, as well as in the bureaucratic form of domination. Thus, we have already encountered formal rationality in our discussion of rational-legal authority and the bureaucracy.

An Overarching Theory?

Although Weber had a complex, multifaceted sense of rationalization, he used it most powerfully and meaningfully in his image of the modern Western world, especially in the capitalistic economy (R. Collins, 1980; Weber, 1927/1981) and bureaucratic organizations (I. Cohen, 1981:xxxi; Weber, 1921/1978:956–1005), as an iron cage (Mitzman, 1969/1971; Tiryakian, 1981) of formally rational structures. Weber described capitalism and bureaucracies as “two great rationalizing forces” (1921/1978:698). In fact, Weber saw capitalism and bureaucracies as being derived from the same basic sources (especially innerworldly asceticism), involving similarly rational and methodical action, and reinforcing one another and in the process furthering the rationalization of the Occident. In Weber’s (1921/1978:227, 994) view, the only real rival to the bureaucrat in technical expertise and factual knowledge was the capitalist.

However, if we take Weber at his word, it is difficult to argue that he had an overarching theory of rationalization. He rejected the idea of “general evolutionary sequence” (Weber, 1927/1981:34). He was critical of thinkers like Hegel and Marx, who he thought offered general, teleological theories of society. In his own work, he tended to shy away from studies of, or proclamations about, whole societies. Instead, he tended to focus, in turn, on social structures and institutions such as bureaucracy, stratification, law, the city, religion, the polity, and the economy. Lacking a sense of the whole, he was unlikely to make global
generalizations, especially about future directions. Furthermore, the rationalization process that Weber described in one social structure or institution was usually quite different from the rationalization of another structure or institution. As Weber put it, the process of rationalization assumes “unusually varied forms” (1922–1923/1958:293; see also Weber, 1904–1905/1958:78, 1921/1958:30), and “the history of rationalism shows a development which by no means follows parallel lines in the various departments of life” (1904–1905/1958:77; see also Brubaker, 1984:9; Kalberg, 1980:1147).

This being said, it is clear that Weber had a deep concern for the overarching effect of the formal rationalization of the economy and bureaucracies on the Western world (Brubaker, 1984). For example, in *Economy and Society*, Weber says:

This whole process of rationalization in the factory as elsewhere, and especially in the bureaucratic state machine, parallels the centralization of the material implements of organization in the hands of the master. Thus, discipline inexorably takes over ever larger areas as the satisfaction of political and economic needs is increasingly rationalized. This universal phenomenon more and more restricts the importance of charisma and of individually differentiated conduct.

(Weber, 1921/1978:1156)

Formal rationalization will be our main, but certainly not only, concern in this section.

**Formal and Substantive Rationality**

Various efforts have been made to delineate the basic characteristics of formal rationality. In Ritzer's (1983, 2015) view, formal rationality may be defined in terms of six basic characteristics:

1. Formally rational structures and institutions emphasize *calculability*, or those things that can be counted or quantified.
2. There is a focus on *efficiency*, on finding the best means to a given end.
3. There is great concern with ensuring *predictability*, or that things operate in the same way from one time or place to another.
4. A formally rational system progressively reduces human technology and ultimately replaces human technology with nonhuman technology. Nonhuman technologies (such as computerized systems) are viewed as more calculable, more efficient, and more predictable than human technologies.
5. Formally rational systems seek to gain *control* over an array of uncertainties, especially the uncertainties posed by human beings who work in, or are served by, them.
6. Rational systems tend to have a series of *irrational consequences* for the people involved with them and for the systems themselves, as well as for the larger society (Sica, 1988). One of the irrationalities of rationality, from Weber’s point of view, is that the world tends to become less enchanted, less magical, and ultimately less meaningful to people (MacKinnon, 2001; Ritzer, 2010; M. Schneider, 1993).9

Formal rationality stands in contrast to all the other types of rationality but is especially in conflict with
substantive rationality (Brubaker, 1984:4). Kalberg argued that Weber believed that the conflict between these two types of rationality played "a particularly fateful role in the unfolding of rationalization processes in the West" (1980:1157).

In addition to differentiating among the four types of rationality, Kalberg dealt with their capacity to introduce methodical ways of life. Practical rationality lacks this ability because it involves reactions to situations rather than efforts to order them. Theoretical rationality is cognitive and therefore has a highly limited ability to suppress practical rationality and seems to be more of an end product than a producer. To Weber, substantive rationality was the only type with the "potential to introduce methodical ways of life" (Kalberg, 1980:1165). Thus, in the West, a particular substantive rationality with an emphasis on a methodical way of life—Calvinism—subjugated practical rationality and led to the development of formal rationality.

Weber's fear was that substantive rationality was becoming less significant than the other types of rationality, especially formal rationality, in the West. Thus, practitioners of formal rationality, such as the bureaucrat and the capitalist, were coming to dominate the West, and the type that "embodied Western civilization's highest ideals: the autonomous and free individual whose actions were given continuity by their reference to ultimate values" (Kalberg, 1980:1176) was fading away (for an alternative view on this, see Titunik, 1997).

**Rationalization in Various Social Settings**

Although the differences among Weber's four types of rationalization have been emphasized here, there are a number of commonalities among them. Thus, as we move from setting to setting, we, like Weber, focus sometimes on rationalization in general and at other times on the specific types of rationalization.

**Economy**

Engerman argued that, although this is rarely cited, "Weber laid out much of the methodological underpinning to what is conventionally called neoclassical economics" (2000:258). This includes the ideal type, methodological individualism, and, most important, rationality and rationalization. The most systematic presentation of Weber's thoughts on the rationalization of the economic institution is to be found in his *General Economic History*. Weber's concern is with the development of the rational capitalistic economy in the Occident, which is a specific example of a rational economy defined as a "functional organization oriented to money-prices which originate in the interest-struggles of men in the market" (Weber, 1915/1958:331).

Although there is a general evolutionary trend, Weber, as always, is careful to point out that there are various sources of capitalism, alternative routes to it, and a range of results emanating from it (Swedberg, 1998). In fact, in the course of rejecting the socialistic theory of evolutionary change, Weber rejects the whole idea of a "general evolutionary sequence" (1927/1981:34).

Weber begins by depicting various irrational and traditional forms, such as the household, clan, village, and manorial economies. For example, the lord of the manor in feudalism was described by Weber as being traditionalistic, "too lacking in initiative to build up a business enterprise in a large scale into which the peasants would have fitted as a labor force" (1927/1981:72). However, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries
in the Occident, feudalism began to break down as the peasants and the land were freed from control by the lord and a money economy was introduced. With this breakdown, the manorial system "showed a strong tendency to develop in a capitalistic direction" (Weber, 1927/1981:79).

At the same time, in the Middle Ages, cities were beginning to develop. Weber focused on the largely urban development of industry involved in the transformation of raw materials. Especially important to Weber is the development of such industrial production beyond the immediate needs of the house community. Notable here is the rise of free craftsmen in the cities. They developed in the Middle Ages in the Occident because, for one thing, this society had developed consumptive needs greater than those of any other. In general, there were larger markets and more purchasers, and the peasantry had greater purchasing power. On the other side, forces operated against the major alternative to craftsmen—slaves. Slavery was found to be too unprofitable and too unstable, and it was made increasingly more unstable by the growth of the towns that offered freedom to the slaves.

In the Occident, along with free craftsmen came the development of the guild, defined by Weber as "an organization of craft workers specialized in accordance with the type of occupation ... [with] internal regulation of work and monopolization against outsiders" (1927/1981:136). Freedom of association was also characteristic of the guilds. But although rational in many senses, guilds also had traditional, anticapitalistic aspects. For example, one master was not supposed to have more capital than another, and this requirement was a barrier to the development of large capitalist organizations.

As the Middle Ages came to a close, the guilds began to disintegrate. This disintegration was crucial because the traditional guilds stood in the way of technological advance. With the dissolution of the guild system came the rise of the domestic system of production, especially the “putting out” system in the textile industry. In such a system, production was decentralized, with much of it taking place within the homes of the workers. Although domestic systems were found throughout the world, it was only in the Occident that the owners controlled the means of production (e.g., tools, raw materials) and provided them to the workers in exchange for the right to dispose of the product. Whereas a fully developed domestic system developed in the West, it was impeded in other parts of the world by such barriers as the clan system (China), the caste system (India), traditionalism, and the lack of free workers.

Next, Weber detailed the development of the workshop (a central work setting without advanced machinery) and then the emergence of the factory in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. In Weber’s view, the factory did not arise out of craft work or the domestic system, but alongside them. Similarly, the factory was not called into existence by advances in machinery; the two developments were correlated. The factory was characterized by free labor that performed specialized and coordinated activities, ownership of the means of production by the entrepreneur, the fixed capital of the entrepreneur, and the system of accounting that is indispensable to such capitalization. Such a factory was, in Weber’s view, a capitalistic organization. In addition to the development of the factory, Weber detailed the rise of other components of a modern capitalistic economy, such as advanced machinery, transportation systems, money, banking, interest, bookkeeping systems, and so on.
What most clearly defined modern rational capitalistic enterprises for Weber is their calculability, which is best represented in their reliance on modern bookkeeping. Isolated calculable enterprises existed in the past in the Occident as well as in other societies. However, an entire society is considered capitalistic only when the everyday requirements of the population are supplied by capitalistic methods and enterprises. Such a society is found only in the Occident, and there only since the mid-nineteenth century.

The development of a capitalistic system hinged on a variety of developments within the economy as well as within the larger society. Within the economy, some of the prerequisites included a free market with large and steady demand, a money economy, inexpensive and rational technologies, a free labor force, a disciplined labor force, rational capital-accounting techniques, and the commercialization of economic life involving the use of shares, stocks, and the like. Many of the economic prerequisites were found only in the Occident. Outside the economy, Weber identified a variety of needed developments, such as a modern state with “professional administration, specialized officialdom, and law based on the concept of citizenship” (1927/1981:313), rational law “made by jurists and rationally interpreted and applied” (1927/1981:313), cities, and modern science and technology. To these Weber added a factor that we discuss in the next section: “a rational ethic for the conduct of life … a religious basis for the ordering of life which consistently followed out must lead to explicit rationalism” (1927/1981:313–314). Like the economic prerequisites, these noneconomic presuppositions occurred together only in the Occident. The basic point is that a rational economy is dependent upon a variety of noneconomic forces throughout the rest of society in order to develop.

Religion

Although we focus on the rationalization of religion in this section, Weber spent much time analyzing the degree to which early, more primitive religions—and religions in much of the world—acted as impediments to the rise of rationality. Weber noted that “the sacred is the uniquely unalterable” (1921/1978:406). Despite this view, religion in the West proved to be alterable; it was amenable to rationalization, and it played a key role in the rationalization of other sectors of society (Kalberg, 1990).

Early religion was composed of a bewildering array of gods, but with rationalization, a clear and coherent set of gods (a pantheon) emerged. Early religions had household gods, kin-group gods, local political gods, and occupational and vocational gods. We get the clear feeling that Weber believed that a cultural force of (theoretical) rationality impelled the emergence of this set of gods: “Reason favored the primacy of universal gods; and every consistent crystallization of a pantheon followed systematic rational principles” (1921/1978:417). A pantheon of gods was not the only aspect of the rationalization of religion discussed by Weber. He also considered the delimitation of the jurisdiction of gods, monotheism, and the anthropomorphization of gods as part of this development. Although the pressure for rationalization exists in many of the world’s religions, in areas outside the Western world, the barriers to rationalization more than counterbalance the pressures for rationalization.

Although Weber had a cultural conception of rationalization, he did not view it simply as a force “out there” that impels people to act. He did not have a group-mind concept. In religion, rationalization is tied to concrete groups of people, in particular to priests. Specifically, the professionally trained priesthood is the
carrier and the expediter of rationalization. In this, priests stand in contrast to magicians, who support a more irrational religious system. The greater rationality of the priesthood is traceable to several factors. Members go through a systematic training program, whereas the training of magicians is unsystematic. Also, priests are fairly highly specialized, whereas magicians tend to be unspecialized. Finally, priests possess a systematic set of religious concepts, and this, too, sets them apart from magicians. We can say that priests are both the products and the expeditors of the process of rationalization.

The priesthood is not the only group that plays a key role in rationalization. Prophets and a laity are also important in the process. Prophets can be distinguished from priests by their personal calling, their emotional preaching, their proclamation of a doctrine, and the fact that they tend to be unpopular and to work alone. The key role of the prophet is the mobilization of the laity, because there would be no religion without a group of followers. Unlike priests, prophets do not tend to the needs of a congregation. Weber differentiated between two types of prophets: ethical and exemplary. Ethical prophets (Muhammad, Jesus Christ, and the Old Testament prophets) believe that they have received a commission directly from God and demand obedience from followers as an ethical duty. Exemplary prophets (Buddha is a model) demonstrate to others by personal example the way to religious salvation. In either case, successful prophets are able to attract large numbers of followers, and it is this mass, along with the priests, that forms the heart of religion. Prophets are likely at first to attract a personal following, but it is necessary that that group be transformed into a permanent congregation. Once such a laity has been formed, major strides have been made in the direction of the rationalization of religion.

Prophets play a key initial role, but once a congregation has been formed, they are no longer needed. In fact, because they are largely irrational, they represent a barrier to the rationalization of religion. A conflict develops between priests and prophets, but it is a conflict that must be won in the long run by the more rational priesthood. In their conflict, the priests are aided by the rationalization proceeding in the rest of society. As the secular world becomes more and more literate and bureaucratized, the task of educating the masses falls increasingly to the priests, whose literacy gives them a tremendous advantage over the prophets. In addition, while the prophets tend to do the preaching, the priests take over the task of day-to-day pastoral care. Although preaching is important during extraordinary times, pastoral care, or the daily religious cultivation of the laity, is an important instrument in the growing power of the priesthood. It was the church in the Western world that combined a rationalized pastoral character with an ethical religion to form a peculiarly influential and rational form of religion. This rationalized religion proved particularly well suited to winning converts among the urban middle class, and it was there that it played a key role in the rationalization of economic life as well as all other sectors of life.

Law

As with his analysis of religion, Weber began his treatment of law with the primitive, which he saw as highly irrational. Primitive law was a rather undifferentiated system of norms. For example, no distinction was made between a civil wrong (a tort) and a crime. Thus, cases involving differences over a piece of land and homicide were likely to be handled, and offenders punished, in much the same way. In addition, primitive law tended to
lack any official machinery. Vengeance dominated reactions to a crime, and law was generally free from procedural formality or rules. Leaders, especially, were virtually unrestrained in what they could do to followers. From this early irrational period, Weber traced a direct line of development to a formalized legal procedure. And as was usual in Weber’s thinking, it is only in the West that a rational, systematic theory of law is held to have developed.

Weber traced several stages in the development of a more rational legal system (Shamir, 1993). An early stage involves charismatic legal revelation through law prophets. Then there is the empirical creation and founding of law by honorary legal officials. Later there is the imposition of law by secular or theocratic powers. Finally, in the most modern case, we have the systematic elaboration of law and professionalized administration of justice by persons who have received their legal training formally and systematically.

In law, as in religion, Weber placed great weight on the process of professionalization: the legal profession is crucial to the rationalization of Western law. There are certainly other factors (e.g., the influence of Roman law), but the legal profession was central to his thinking: “Formally elaborated law constituting a complex of maxims consciously applied in decisions has never come into existence without the decisive cooperation of trained specialists” (Weber, 1921/1978:775). Although Weber was aware that there was a series of external pressures—especially from the rationalizing economy—impelling law toward rationalization, his view was that the most important force was the internal factor of the professionalization of the legal profession (776).

Weber differentiated between two types of legal training but saw only one as contributing to the development of rational law. The first is craft training, in which apprentices learn from masters, primarily during the actual practice of law. This kind of training produces a formalistic type of law dominated by precedents. The goal is not the creation of a comprehensive, rational system of law but, instead, the production of practically useful precedents for dealing with recurring situations. Because these precedents are tied to specific issues in the real world, a general, rational, and systematic body of law cannot emerge.

In contrast, academic legal training laid the groundwork for the rational law of the West. In this system, law is taught in special schools where the emphasis is placed on legal theory and science—in other words, where legal phenomena are given rational and systematic treatment. The legal concepts produced have the character of abstract norms. Interpretation of these laws occurs in a rigorously formal and logical manner. They are general, in contrast to the specific, precedent-bound laws produced in the case of craft training.

Academic legal training leads to the development of a rational legal system with a number of characteristics, including the following:

1. Every concrete legal decision involves the application of abstract legal propositions to concrete situations.
2. It must be possible in every concrete case to derive the decision logically from abstract legal propositions.
3. Law must tend to be a gapless system of legal propositions or at least be treated as one.
4. The gapless legal system should be applicable to all social actions.

Weber seemed to adopt the view that history has seen law evolve from a cultural system of norms to a more
structured system of formal laws. In general, actors are increasingly constrained by a more and more rational legal system. Although this is true, Weber was too good a sociologist to lose sight completely of the independent significance of the actor. For one thing, Weber (1921/1978:754–755) saw actors as crucial in the emergence of, and change in, law. However, the most important aspect of Weber's work in this area—for the purposes of this discussion—is the degree to which law is regarded as part of the general process of rationalization throughout the West.

**Polity**

The rationalization of the political system is intimately linked to the rationalization of law and, ultimately, to the rationalization of all elements of the social system. For example, Weber argued that the more rational the political structure becomes, the more likely it is to eliminate systematically the irrational elements within the law. A rational polity cannot function with an irrational legal system, and vice versa. Weber did not believe that political leaders follow a conscious policy of rationalizing the law; rather, they are impelled in that direction by the demands of their own increasingly rational means of administration. Once again, Weber took the position that actors are being impelled by structural (the state) and cultural (rationalization) forces.

Weber defined the *polity* as "a community whose social action is aimed at subordinating to orderly domination by the participants a territory and the conduct of the persons within it, through readiness to resort to physical force, including normally force of arms" (1921/1978:901). This type of polity has existed neither everywhere nor always. It does not exist as a separate entity where the task of armed defense against enemies is assigned to the household, the neighborhood association, an economic group, and so forth. Although Weber clearly viewed the polity as a social structure, he was more careful to link his thinking here to his individual action orientations. In his view, modern political associations rest on the prestige bestowed upon them by their members.

As was his usual strategy, Weber went back to the primitive case in order to trace the development of the polity. He made it clear that violent social action is primordial. However, the monopolization and rational ordering of legitimate violence did not exist in early societies but evolved over the centuries. Not only is rational control over violence lacking in primitive society, but other basic functions of the modern state either are totally absent or are not ordered in a rational manner. Included here would be functions like legislation, police, justice, administration, and the military. The development of the polity in the West involves the progressive differentiation and elaboration of these functions. But the most important step is their subordination under a single, dominant, rationally ordered state.

**The City**

Weber was also interested in the rise of the city in the West. The city provided an alternative to the feudal order and a setting in which modern capitalism and, more generally, rationality could develop. He defined a city as having the following characteristics:

1. It is a relatively closed settlement.
2. It is relatively large.
3. It possesses a marketplace.
4. It has partial political autonomy.

Although many cities in many societies had these characteristics, Western cities developed a peculiarly rational character with, among other things, a rationally organized marketplace and political structure.

Weber looked at various other societies in order to determine why they did not develop the rational form of the city. He concluded that barriers like the traditional community in China and the caste system in India impeded the rise of such a city. But in the West, a number of rationalizing forces coalesced to create the modern city. For example, the development of a city requires a relatively rational economy. But, of course, the converse is also true: the development of a rational economy requires the modern city.

Art Forms

To give a sense of the breadth of Weber’s thinking, a few words are needed about his work on the rationalization of various art forms. For example, Weber (1921/1958) viewed music in the West as having developed in a peculiarly rational direction. Musical creativity is reduced to routine procedures based on comprehensive principles. Music in the Western world has undergone a “transformation of the process of musical production into a calculable affair operating with known means, effective instruments, and understandable rules” (Weber, 1921/1958:li). Although the process of rationalization engenders tension in all the institutions in which it occurs, that tension is nowhere more noticeable than in music. After all, music is supposed to be an arena of expressive flexibility, but it is being progressively reduced to a rational, and ultimately mathematical, system.

Weber (1904–1905/1958) sees a similar development in other art forms. For example, in painting, Weber emphasizes “the rational utilization of lines and spatial perspective—which the Renaissance created for us” (1904–1905/1958:15). In architecture, “the rational use of the Gothic vault as a means of distributing pressure and of roofing spaces of all forms, and above all as the constructive principle of great monumental buildings and the foundation of a style extending to sculpture and painting, such as that created by our Middle Ages, does not occur elsewhere [in the world]” (15).

We have now spent a number of pages examining Weber’s ideas on rationalization in various aspects of social life. Although nowhere does Weber explicitly say so, it is reasonable to argue that he adopted the view that changes in the cultural level of rationality are leading to changes in the structures as well as in the individual thoughts and actions of the modern world. The rationalization process is not left to float alone above concrete phenomena but is embedded in various social structures and in the thoughts and actions of individuals. To put it slightly differently, the key point is that the cultural system of rationality occupies a position of causal priority in Weber’s work. This can be illustrated in still another way by looking at Weber’s work on the relationship between religion and economics—more specifically, the relationship between religion and the development, or lack of development, of a capitalist economy.

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism

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Weber spent much of his life studying religion—this in spite of, or perhaps because of, his being areligious, or, as he once described himself, “religiously unmusical” (Gerth and Mills, 1958:25). One of his overriding concerns was the relationship among a variety of the world’s religions and the development only in the West of a capitalist economic system (Schluchter, 1996). It is clear that the vast bulk of this work is done at the social-structural and cultural levels; the thoughts and actions of Calvinists, Buddhists, Confucians, Jews, Muslims (Nafassi, 1998; B. Turner, 1974), and others are held to be affected by changes in social structures and social institutions. Weber was interested primarily in the systems of ideas of the world’s religions, in the “spirit” of capitalism, and in rationalization as a modern system of norms and values. He was also very interested in the structures of the world’s religions, the various structural components of the societies in which they exist that serve to facilitate or impede rationalization, and the structural aspects of capitalism and the rest of the modern world.
The Printing Press and the Protestant Reformation: Historical Contexts

Famously, Marshall McLuhan (1964/2013:1) said that “the medium is the message.” By this he meant that the technologies through which we communicate (oral speech, books, television, Internet) are just as important in shaping social life as the content of communication itself. Different media allow for the development of different kinds of social action, interpersonal relationship, and consciousness. The invention of the book, for example, allowed the development of personal inner life (Ong, 1982). And the invention of the newspaper allowed the emergence of modern national consciousness (B. Anderson, 1991). The printing press is an invention that contributed to the development of Protestant Christianity and hence, as we see in Weber’s work, modern capitalism.

The Protestant Reformation was a movement within Western Christianity that challenged the unchecked and increasingly corrupt authority of the Catholic Church. It led to the division within Western Christianity between Catholicism and Protestantism and, later, the development of Protestant sects such as Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, Anabaptism, and Methodism. The printing press aligned with the aspirations of Protestant reformers because it allowed widespread distribution of religious literature and criticism of the Catholic Church.

The printing press was invented by German Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century. Prior to the invention of the printing press, manuscripts were reproduced by hand, mostly in monasteries. The printing press used moveable type and ink to repeatedly press the same text onto paper. This allowed for the mass production of books. Whereas monks worked by hand, the printer worked by machine. Whereas monastic manuscripts were intended for an educated religious elite (priests, popes, and scholars), printed books were intended for a wide range of readers. Whereas manuscripts were written in the sacred languages of Latin and Greek, printed books were published in a variety of vernacular languages (e.g., German).

The printing press allowed Reformers to quickly disseminate their criticisms of the Catholic Church to a broad audience. For example, the Reformation is said to have started when, in 1517, the monk Martin Luther posted the Disputation on the Power of Indulgences (also known as the Ninety-Five Theses) on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This was a list of ninety-five criticisms of the Catholic Church. Hanging on a church door in a German town, the criticisms would not have gone very far. However, the Ninety-Five Theses were also distributed in print across Germany. Citing Febvre and Martin, Benedict Anderson (1991:39) wrote that “within 15 days” the Ninety-Five Theses “had been seen in every part of the country.”

It was not just that criticism could be widely distributed. Because the press allowed for the relatively efficient and inexpensive production of books, they could now be printed in many different languages. What this meant is that religious books, like the Bible, were no longer under the exclusive control of priests and popes. As Eisenstein (1979/2009: 305) put it, the Reformers “viewed printing as a providential device which ended forever a priestly monopoly of learning, overcame ignorance and superstition, pushed back the evil forces commanded by Italian popes, and, in general, brought Western Europe out of the dark ages.” In short, the printing press opened up the possibility that people could read the Bible and interpret its meaning for themselves.

Reformers were well aware of the significance of the printing press for the development of Protestantism. Eisenstein cites several examples. Luther “described printing as ‘God’s highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward’” (cited in Eisenstein, 1979/2009:304). Similarly, the sixteenth-century Protestant scholar Johann Sleiden wrote:

As if to offer proof that God has chosen us to accomplish a special mission, there was invented in our land a marvelous new and subtle art, the art of printing. This opened German eyes even as it is now bringing enlightenment to other countries. Each man became eager for knowledge, not without feeling a sense of amazement at his former blindness. (Cited in Eisenstein, 1979/2009:305)

Max Weber, as we see in this chapter, argued that social change is driven by many forces, both cultural and material. In the example of the printing press we find a material force (a physical technology) that is central to the development of Christian Protestantism and hence to the development of modern Western society.

Weber’s work on religion and capitalism involved an enormous body of cross-cultural historical research; here, as elsewhere, he did comparative-historical sociology (Kalberg, 1997). Julian Freund (1968:213) summarized
the complicated interrelationships involved in this research:

1. Economic forces influenced Protestantism.
2. Economic forces influenced religions other than Protestantism (e.g., Hinduism, Confucianism, and Taoism).
3. Religious idea systems influenced individual thoughts and actions—in particular, economic thoughts and actions.
4. Religious idea systems have been influential throughout the world.
5. Religious idea systems (particularly Protestantism) have had the unique effect in the West of helping to rationalize the economic sector and virtually every other institution.

To this we can add:
6. Religious idea systems in the non-Western world have created overwhelming structural barriers to rationalization.

By according the religious factor great importance, Weber appeared to be simultaneously building on and criticizing his image of Marx's work. Weber, like Marx, operated with a complicated model of the interrelationship of primarily large-scale systems: “Weber's sociology is related to Marx's thought in the common attempt to grasp the interrelations of institutional orders making up a social structure: In Weber's work, military and religious, political and juridical institutional systems are functionally related to the economic order in a variety of ways” (Gerth and Mills, 1958:49). In fact, Weber's affinities with Marx are even greater than is often recognized. Although Weber, especially early in his career, gave primacy to religious ideas, he later came to see that material forces, not idea systems, are of greater importance (Kalberg, 1985:61). As Weber said, “Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (cited in Gerth and Mills, 1958:280).

Paths to Salvation

In analyzing the relationship between the world's religions and the economy, Weber (1921/1963) developed a typology of the paths of salvation. Asceticism is the first broad type of religiosity, and it combines an orientation toward action with the commitment of believers to denying themselves the pleasures of the world. Ascetic religions are divided into two subtypes. Otherworldly asceticism involves a set of norms and values that command the followers not to work within the secular world and to fight against its temptations (Kalberg, 2001). Of greater interest to Weber, because it encompasses Calvinism, was innerworldly asceticism. Such a religion does not reject the world; instead, it actively urges its members to work within the world so that they can find salvation, or at least signs of it. The distinctive goal here is the strict, methodical control of the members' patterns of life, thought, and action. Members are urged to reject everything unethical, esthetic, or dependent on their emotional reactions to the secular world. Innerworldly ascetics are motivated to systematize their own conduct.

Whereas both types of asceticism involve some type of action and self-denial, mysticism involves
contemplation, emotion, and inaction. Weber subdivided mysticism in the same way as asceticism. *World-rejecting mysticism* involves total flight from the world. *Innerworldly mysticism* leads to contemplative efforts to understand the meaning of the world, but these efforts are doomed to failure, because the world is viewed as being beyond individual comprehension. In any case, both types of mysticism and world-rejecting asceticism can be seen as idea systems that inhibit the development of capitalism and rationality. In contrast, innerworldly asceticism is the system of norms and values that contributed to the development of these phenomena in the West.

**The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**

In Max Weber's best-known work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905/1958), he traced the impact of ascetic Protestantism—primarily Calvinism—on the rise of the spirit of capitalism (Breiner, 2005; H. Jones, 1997). This work is but a small part of a larger body of scholarship that traces the relationship between religion and modern capitalism throughout much of the world.

Weber, especially later in his work, made it clear that his most general interest was in the rise of the distinctive rationality of the West. Capitalism, with its rational organization of free labor, its open market, and its rational bookkeeping system, is only one component of that developing system. He directly linked it to the parallel development of rationalized science, law, politics, art, architecture, literature, universities, and the polity.

Weber did not directly link the idea system of the Protestant ethic to the structures of the capitalist system; instead, he was content to link the Protestant ethic to another system of ideas, the “spirit of capitalism.” In other words, two systems of ideas are directly linked in this work. Although links of the capitalist economic system to the material world are certainly implied and indicated, they were not Weber's primary concern. Thus, *The Protestant Ethic* is not about the rise of modern capitalism but is about the origin of a peculiar spirit that eventually made modern rational capitalism (some form of capitalism had existed since early times) expand and come to dominate the economy.

Weber began by examining and rejecting alternative explanations of why capitalism arose in the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (for an alternative view on this, see R. Collins, 1997a). To those who contended that capitalism arose because the material conditions were right at that time, Weber retorted that material conditions were also ripe at other times and capitalism did not arise. Weber also rejected the psychological theory that the development of capitalism was due simply to the acquisitive instinct. In his view, such an instinct always has existed, yet it did not produce capitalism in other situations.

Evidence for Weber's views on the significance of Protestantism was found in an examination of countries with mixed religious systems. In looking at these countries, he discovered that the leaders of the economic system—business leaders, owners of capital, high-grade skilled labor, and more advanced technically and commercially trained personnel—were all overwhelmingly Protestant. This suggested that Protestantism was a significant cause in the choice of these occupations and, conversely, that other religions (e.g., Roman Catholicism) failed to produce idea systems that impelled individuals into these vocations.
In Weber’s view, the spirit of capitalism is not defined simply by economic greed; it is in many ways the exact opposite. It is a moral and ethical system, an ethos, that among other things stresses economic success. In fact, it was the turning of profit making into an ethos that was critical in the West. In other societies, the pursuit of profit was seen as an individual act motivated at least in part by greed. Thus, it was viewed by many as morally suspect. However, Protestantism succeeded in turning the pursuit of profit into a moral crusade. It was the backing of the moral system that led to the unprecedented expansion of profit seeking and, ultimately, to the capitalist system. On a theoretical level, by stressing that he was dealing with the relationship between one ethos (Protestantism) and another (the spirit of capitalism), Weber was able to keep his analysis primarily at the level of systems of ideas.

The spirit of capitalism can be seen as a normative system that involves a number of interrelated ideas. For example, its goal is to instill an “attitude which seeks profit rationally and systematically” (Weber, 1904–1905/1958:64). In addition, it preaches an avoidance of life’s pleasures: “Seest thou a man diligent in business? He shall stand before kings” (Weber, 1904–1905/1958:53). Also included in the spirit of capitalism are ideas such as “time is money,” “be industrious,” “be frugal,” “be punctual,” “be fair,” and “earning money is a legitimate end in itself.” Above all, there is the idea that it is people’s duty to increase their wealth ceaselessly. This takes the spirit of capitalism out of the realm of individual ambition and into the category of an ethical imperative. Although Weber admitted that a type of capitalism (e.g., adventurer capitalism) existed in China, India, Babylon, and the classical world and during the Middle Ages, it was different from Western capitalism, primarily because it lacked “this particular ethos” (1904–1905/1958:52).

Weber was interested not simply in describing this ethical system but also in explaining its derivations. He thought that Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, was crucial to the rise of the spirit of capitalism. Calvinism is no longer necessary to the continuation of that economic system. In fact, in many senses modern capitalism, given its secularity, stands in opposition to Calvinism and to religion in general. Capitalism today has become a real entity that combines norms, values, market, money, and laws. It has become, in Durkheim’s terms, a social fact that is external to, and coercive of, the individual. As Weber put it:

> Capitalism is today an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalist rules of action.


Another crucial point here is that Calvinists did not consciously seek to create a capitalist system. In Weber’s view, capitalism was an unanticipated consequence (Cherkaoui, 2007) of the Protestant ethic. The concept of unanticipated consequences has broad significance in Weber’s work, for he believed that what individuals and groups intend by their actions often leads to a set of consequences that are at variance with their intentions. Although Weber did not explain this point, it seems that it is related to his theoretical view that people create social structures but those structures soon take on a life of their own, over which the creators have little or no
control. Because people lack control over them, structures are free to develop in a variety of totally unanticipated directions. Weber's line of thinking led Arthur Mitzman (1969/1971) to argue that Weber created a sociology of reification. Reified social structures are free to move in unanticipated directions, as both Marx and Weber showed in their analyses of capitalism.

**Calvinism and the Spirit of Capitalism**

Calvinism was the version of Protestantism that interested Weber most. One feature of Calvinism was the idea that only a small number of people are chosen for salvation. In addition, Calvinism entailed the idea of predestination; people were predestined to be either among the saved or among the damned. There was nothing that the individual or the religion as a whole could do to affect that fate. Yet the idea of predestination left people uncertain about whether they were among the saved. To reduce this uncertainty, the Calvinists developed the idea that signs could be used as indicators of whether a person was saved. People were urged to work hard, because if they were diligent, they would uncover the signs of salvation, which were to be found in economic success. In sum, the Calvinist was urged to engage in intense, worldly activity and to become a “man of vocation.”

However, isolated actions were not enough. Calvinism, as an ethic, required self-control and a systematized style of life that involved an integrated round of activities, particularly business activities. This stood in contrast to the Christian ideal of the Middle Ages, in which individuals simply engaged in isolated acts as the occasion arose in order to atone for particular sins and to increase their chances of salvation. “The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system” (Weber, 1904–1905/1958:117). Calvinism produced an ethical system and ultimately a group of people who were nascent capitalists. Calvinism “has the highest ethical appreciation of the sober, middle-class, self-made man” (163). Weber neatly summarized his own position on Calvinism and its relationship to capitalism as follows:

The religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means of asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of … the spirit of capitalism.


In addition to its general link to the spirit of capitalism, Calvinism had some more specific links. First, as already mentioned, capitalists could ruthlessly pursue their economic interests and feel that such pursuit was not merely self-interest but was, in fact, their ethical duty. This not only permitted unprecedented mercilessness in business but also silenced potential critics, who could not simply reduce these actions to self-interest. Second, Calvinism provided the rising capitalist “with sober, conscientious and unusually industrious workmen who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God” (Weber, 1904–1905/1958:117). With such a workforce, the nascent capitalist could raise the level of exploitation to unprecedented heights. Third, Calvinism legitimized an unequal stratification system by giving the capitalist the “comforting assurances that
the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence” (117).

Weber also had reservations about the capitalist system, as he did about all aspects of the rationalized world. For example, he pointed out that capitalism tends to produce “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (Weber, 1904–1905/1958:182).

Although in *The Protestant Ethic* Weber focused on the effect of Calvinism on the spirit of capitalism, he was well aware that social and economic conditions have a reciprocal impact on religion. He chose not to deal with such relationships in this book, but he made it clear that his goal was not to substitute a one-sided spiritualist interpretation for the one-sided materialist explanation that he attributed to Marxists. (The same is true of much of the rest of his work, including his essays on the Russian Revolution; see Wells and Baehr, 1995:22.) As Kalberg (1996) has pointed out, *The Protestant Ethic* raises a wide number of issues that go to the heart of contemporary sociological theory.

If Calvinism was one of the causal factors in the rise of capitalism in the West, then the question arises: Why didn’t capitalism arise in other societies? In his effort to answer this question, Weber dealt with spiritual and material barriers to the rise of capitalism. Let us look briefly at Weber’s analysis of those barriers in two societies—China and India.

**Religion and Capitalism in China**

One crucial assumption that allowed Weber to make legitimate the comparison between the West and China is that both had the prerequisites for the development of capitalism. In China, there was a tradition of intense acquisitiveness and unscrupulous competition. There was great industry and an enormous capacity for work in the populace. Powerful guilds existed. The population was expanding. And there was a steady growth in precious metals. With these and other material prerequisites, why didn’t capitalism arise in China? As has been pointed out before, Weber’s general answer was that social, structural, and religious barriers in China prevented the development of capitalism. This is not to say that capitalism was entirely absent in China (Love, 2000). There were moneylenders and purveyors who sought high rates of profit. But a market, as well as various other components of a rational capitalistic system, was absent. In Weber’s view, the rudimentary capitalism of China “pointed in a direction opposite to the development of rational economic corporate enterprises” (1916/1964:86).

**Structural Barriers**

Weber listed several structural barriers to the rise of capitalism in China. First, there was the structure of the typical Chinese community. It was held together by rigid kinship bonds in the form of sibs. The sibs were ruled by elders, who made them bastions of traditionalism. The sibs were self-contained entities, and there was little dealing with other sibs. This encouraged small, encapsulated landholdings and a household-based, rather than a market, economy. The extensive partitioning of the land prevented major technological developments, because economies of scale were impossible. Agricultural production remained in the hands of peasants, industrial production in the hands of small-scale artisans. Modern cities, which were to become the
centers of Western capitalism, were inhibited in their development because the people retained their allegiance to the sibs. Because of the sibs’ autonomy, the central government was never able to govern these units effectively or to mold them into a unified whole.

The structure of the Chinese state was a second barrier to the rise of capitalism. The state was largely patrimonial and governed by tradition, prerogative, and favoritism. In Weber’s view, a rational and calculable system of administration and law enforcement, which was necessary for industrial development, did not exist. There were very few formal laws covering commerce, there was no central court, and legal formalism was rejected. This irrational type of administrative structure was a barrier to the rise of capitalism, as Weber made clear: “Capital investment in industry is far too sensitive to such irrational rule and too dependent upon the possibility of calculating the steady and rational operation of the state machinery to emerge within an administration of this type” (1916/1964:103). In addition to its general structure, a number of more specific components of the state acted against the development of capitalism. For example, the officials of the bureaucratic administration had vested material interests that made them oppose capitalism. Officials often bought offices primarily to make a profit, and this kind of orientation did not necessarily make for a high degree of efficiency.

A third structural barrier to the rise of capitalism was the nature of the Chinese language. In Weber’s view, it militated against rationality by making systematic thought difficult. It remained largely in the realm of the “pictorial” and the “descriptive.” Logical thinking was also inhibited because intellectual thought remained largely in the form of parables, and this hardly was the basis for the development of a cumulative body of knowledge.

Although there were other structural barriers to the rise of capitalism (e.g., a country without wars or overseas trade), a key factor was the lack of the required “mentality,” the lack of the needed idea system. Weber looked at the two dominant systems of religious ideas in China—Confucianism and Taoism—and the characteristics of both that militated against the development of a spirit of capitalism.

**Confucianism**

A central characteristic of Confucian thinking was its emphasis on a literary education as a prerequisite for office and for social status. To acquire a position in the ruling strata, a person had to be a member of the literati. Movement up the hierarchy was based on a system of ideas that tested literary knowledge, not the technical knowledge needed to conduct the office in question. What was valued and tested was whether the individual’s mind was steeped in culture and whether it was characterized by ways of thought suitable to a cultured man. In Weber’s terms, Confucianism encouraged “a highly bookish literary education” (Weber, 1916/1964:121). The literati produced by this system came to see the actual work of administration as beneath them, mere tasks to be delegated to subordinates. Instead, the literati aspired to clever puns, euphemisms, and allusions to classical quotations—a purely literary kind of intellectuality. With this kind of orientation, it is easy to see why the literati were unconcerned with the state of the economy or with economic activities. The worldview of the Confucians ultimately grew to be the policy of the state. As a result, the Chinese state came to be only minimally involved in rationally influencing the economy and the rest of
The Confucians maintained their influence by having the constitution decree that only they could serve as officials, and competitors to Confucians (e.g., the bourgeoisie, prophets, and priests) were blocked from serving in the government. In fact, if the emperor dared to deviate from this rule, he was thought to be toying with disaster and his potential downfall.

Many other components of Confucianism militated against capitalism. It was basically an ethic of adjustment to the world and to its order and its conventions. Rather than viewing material success and wealth as a sign of salvation as the Calvinist did, the Confucian simply was led to accept things as they were. In fact, there was no idea of salvation in Confucianism, and this lack of tension between religion and the world also acted to inhibit the rise of capitalism. The snobbish Confucian was urged to reject thrift, because it was something that commoners practiced. In contrast to the Puritan work ethic, it was not regarded as proper for a Confucian gentleman to work, although wealth was prized. Active engagement in a profitable enterprise was regarded as morally dubious and unbecoming to a Confucian’s station. The acceptable goal for such a gentleman was a good position, not high profits. The ethic emphasized the abilities of a gentleman rather than the highly specialized skills that could have proved useful to a developing capitalist system. In sum, Weber contended that Confucianism became a relentless canonization of tradition.

Taoism

Weber perceived Taoism as a mystical Chinese religion in which the supreme good was deemed to be a psychic state, a state of mind, and not a state of grace to be obtained by conduct in the real world. As a result, Taoists did not operate in a rational way to affect the external world. Taoism was essentially traditional, and one of its basic tenets was “Do not introduce innovations” (Weber, 1916/1964:203). Such an idea system was unlikely to produce any major changes, let alone one as far-reaching as capitalism.

One trait common to Taoism and Confucianism is that neither produced enough tension, or conflict, among the members to motivate them to much innovative action in this world:

Neither in its official state cult nor in its Taoist aspect could Chinese religiosity produce sufficiently strong motives for a religiously oriented life for the individual such as the Puritan method represents. Both forms of religion lacked even the traces of the Satanic force or evil against which [the] pious Chinese might have struggled for his salvation.


As was true of Confucianism, there was no inherent force in Taoism to impel actors to change the world or, more specifically, to build a capitalist system.

Religion and Capitalism in India

For our purposes, a very brief discussion of Weber’s (1916–1917/1958) thinking on the relationship between religion and capitalism in India will suffice. The argument, though not its details, parallels the Chinese case. For example, Weber discussed the structural barriers of the caste system (Gellner, 1982:534). Among other
things, the caste system erected overwhelming barriers to social mobility, and it tended to regulate even the most minute aspects of people’s lives. The idea system of the Brahmans had a number of components. For example, Brahmans were expected to avoid vulgar occupations and to observe elegance in manners and proprieties in conduct. Indifference to the world’s mundane affairs was the crowning idea of Brahman religiosity. The Brahmans also emphasized a highly literary kind of education. Although there certainly were important differences between Brahmans and Confucians, the ethos of each presented overwhelming barriers to the rise of capitalism.

The Hindu religion posed similar ideational barriers. Its key idea was reincarnation. To the Hindu, a person is born into the caste that he or she deserves by virtue of behavior in a past life. Through faithful adherence to the ritual of caste, the Hindu gains merit for the next life. Hinduism, unlike Calvinism, was traditional in the sense that salvation was to be achieved by faithfully following the rules; innovation, particularly in the economic sphere, could not lead to a higher caste in the next life. Activity in this world was not important, because the world was seen as a transient abode and an impediment to the spiritual quest. In these and other ways, the idea system associated with Hinduism failed to produce the kind of people who could create a capitalist economic system and, more generally, a rationally ordered society.
Criticisms

From among the numerous criticisms of Weber, we examine four of the most important. The first criticism has to do with Weber’s *verstehen* method. Weber was caught between two problems in regard to *verstehen*. On the one hand, it could not simply mean a subjective intuition because this would not be scientific. On the other hand, the sociologist could not just proclaim the “objective” meaning of the social phenomenon. Weber declared that his method fell between these two choices, but he never fully explained how (Herva, 1988). The deficiencies in his methodology are not always apparent from the reading of Weber’s insightful analysis based on his own interpretations. But they become perfectly clear when sociologists try to apply his method to their own research or, even more so, when they attempt to teach *verstehen* to others. Clearly, the method involves systemic and rigorous research, but the magic of turning that research into Weber’s illuminating insights eludes us. This has led some (Abel, 1948) to relegate *verstehen* to a heuristic operation of discovery that precedes the real scientific work of sociology. Others have suggested that *verstehen* needs to be seen as itself a social process and that our understanding of others always precedes out of a dialogue (Shields, 1996).

The second criticism is that Weber lacks a fully theorized macrosociology. We have already spent some time exploring the contradiction between Weber’s individualistic method and his focus on large-scale social structures and world-historical norms. In Weber’s method, class is reduced to a collection of people in the same economic situation. Political structure is reduced to the acceptance of domination because of subjectively perceived legitimacy in terms of rationality, charisma, or traditions. Weber certainly recognized that class and political structures have effects on people—not to mention such macrophenomena as religion and rationalization—but he had no way to theorize these effects except as a collection of unintended consequences. He had no theory of how these work as systems behind the backs of individuals and, in some cases, even to determine the intention of actors (B. Turner, 1981).

The third criticism of Weber is that he lacks a critical theory. In other words, others have said that Weber’s theory cannot be used to point out opportunities for constructive change. This criticism can be demonstrated through examining Weber’s theory of rationalization.

Weber used the term *rationalization* in a number of ways, but he was primarily concerned with two types. One concerns the development of bureaucracy and its legal form of authority. The other refers to the subjective changes in attitude that he called formal rationality. In the confluence of bureaucracy and formal rationality we see what Weber described as unintended consequences. The creation of bureaucracy and the adaptation of formal rationality end up undermining the very purposes that the rationalization was meant to serve. This is what we have called the irrational consequences of rationality. Weber’s famous iron cage is one of these irrational consequences. Bureaucracy and formal rationality were initially developed because of their efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control in achieving a given goal (e.g., to help the poor). But as rationalization proceeds, the original goal tends to be forgotten, and the organization increasingly devotes itself to efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control for their own sakes. For example, welfare bureaucracies measure their success by their efficiency in “dealing” with clients, even their efficiency in getting them off welfare, regardless of whether doing so actually serves the original goal of helping the poor to better
their situations.

In some of his most-quoted passages, Weber implies that this process is inevitable, as for example in his metaphor of the iron cage. However, as argued earlier, it would be wrong to see this as a general evolutionary sequence of inevitable rationalization. Johannes Weiss (1987) maintained that rationalization is inevitable only to the extent that we want it to be so. It is simply that our world is so complex that it is difficult to conceive of accomplishing any significant task without the efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of rationalization—even if it inevitably ends in its own peculiar irrationality. We may dream of a world without bureaucracies, but "the real question is whether—with due regard to the obligations of intellectual honesty—we seriously strive to attain it or ever could" (Weiss, 1987:162).

The final criticism is of the unremitting pessimism of Weber's sociology. We can see from Weber's sociological method that he firmly believed in the centrality of individual meaning; however, his substantive work on rationalization and domination indicated that we are trapped in an increasingly meaningless and disenchanted world. It could be said that anyone who still feels optimistic about our culture after reading the closing pages of *The Protestant Ethic* simply hasn't understood them. This alone is not a criticism of Weber. It is shortsighted to criticize someone who points out your cage, if in fact you are in one. Nevertheless, not only did Weber not attempt to provide us with alternatives, he seems to have missed the fact that some of the unintended consequences may be beneficial.
Contemporary Applications

Max Weber has had a more powerful positive impact on a wide range of sociological theories than any other sociological theorist. This influence is traceable to the sophistication, complexity, and sometimes even confusion of Weberian theory. Methodologically, Weber developed a historically grounded, hermeneutic alternative to both positivist and postmodern sociology. Weberian theory objects to not only the quantitative and abstract approach of positivist sociology but also the relativistic social constructionism inherent in many contemporary sociological theories. Although explanations of social life and human intention can never be perfect, it is possible to provide more or less accurate accounts of the historical basis for meaningful social action. Weber’s contribution to this hermeneutic perspective has been described by Ivan Oliver (1983), and Kalberg (2011b) has described Weber’s unique contribution to comparative-historical research. Sociologists have also made use of Weber’s substantive ideas to analyze contemporary social life. Here we focus on two of the many applications of his ideas.

First, George Ritzer (2015) introduced the concept of McDonaldization to analyze the process of rationalization in contemporary consumer society. For Weber, bureaucracy was the central form of rationalization in nineteenth-century Europe. Ritzer has treated the fast-food industry, and in particular the McDonald’s restaurant, as the model for rationalization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The McDonald’s restaurant embodies major institutionalized features of formal rationality: calculability, efficiency, predictability, control of uncertainty, and the increasing use of technology. In short, the McDonald’s restaurant has introduced a form of consumption which is reliable, is cheap, and fits well into consumer societies that are organized around speed and efficiency. Like bureaucracy, McDonaldization threatens to disenchant everyday life. Yet, in ways that Weber did not anticipate, the consumer culture has learned to re-enchant the world by continually introducing new and more spectacular varieties of consumption (Ritzer, 2010). The continuing applicability of Weber’s and Ritzer’s concepts is demonstrated by the growing number of studies that analyze the McDonaldization of institutions other than the fast-food restaurant.

Second, sociologists have applied Weber’s concept of charismatic authority to understand leaders of new religious movements/cults (Joosse, 2012), social movements such as the Falun Gong (Junker, 2014), and political leadership. For example, Karin Knorr-Cetina (2009) applied the concept of charisma to explain the election of Barack Obama to the American presidency. She began by reminding us that charisma is not a quality intrinsic to the leader but something attributed by the group. The first question then is why did “so many Americans feel inspired to give him unconditional allegiance?” (2009:132) Knorr-Cetina traced this willingness to the social and economic climate. In the years leading up to the 2008 election, “America experienced the massive decline of its currency, an enormous economic deficit, a creeping loss of jobs to cheaper countries, and a poor performance in the Iraq war and in its war on terrorism, during the Bush years” (133). Many Americans, in other words, were ready to give their allegiance to a person who could change the situation. But who could “inhabit” the role of charismatic leader? Why Obama rather than his democrat rival, Hillary Clinton? Both promised policy change, but most importantly Knorr-Cetina suggested, Obama was perceived as an outsider. Charismatic leaders are always outsiders. They challenge the bureaucracy. They
challenge the status quo. In addition, drawing on the folk tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, Knorr-Cetina proposed that the charismatic leader must be a "piper." Obama is a tremendous piper. His deep and authoritative voice is his instrument. He makes it "resonate in the listener" (135). Moreover, during the campaign, the reach of his voice was extended through widespread advertising and an unprecedented use of social media. Indeed, through text messaging, Obama’s campaign created a feeling of immediacy, intimacy, and connection that left Obama’s followers, Knorr-Cetina claimed, craving and adoring his attention. Knorr-Cetina not only reaffirmed the collective basis of charisma but in discussing media technology emphasized a very contemporary technique of charisma production.
Summary

This chapter opens with a discussion of the theoretical roots and methodological orientations of Weberian theory. Weber, over the course of his career, moved progressively toward a fusion of history and sociology, that is, toward the development of a historical sociology. One of his most critical methodological concepts is \textit{verstehen}. Although this is often interpreted as a tool to be used to analyze individual consciousness, in Weber’s hands it was more often a scientific tool to analyze structural and institutional constraints on actors. Other aspects of Weber’s methodology, including his propensity to think in terms of causality and to employ ideal types, are discussed. In addition, we examine his analysis of the relationship between values and sociology.

The heart of Weberian sociology lies in substantive sociology, not in methodological statements. Although Weber based his theories on his thoughts about social action and social relationships, his main interest was the large-scale structures and institutions of society. We examine especially his analysis of the three structures of authority—rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. In the context of rational-legal authority, we deal with his famous ideal-typical bureaucracy and show how he used that tool to analyze traditional and charismatic authority. Of particular interest is Weber’s work on charisma. Not only did he have a clear sense of it as a structure of authority, he was also interested in the processes by which such a structure is produced.

Although his work on social structures—such as authority—is important, it is at the cultural level, in his work on the rationalization of the world, that Weber’s most important insights lie. Weber articulated the idea that the world is becoming increasingly dominated by norms and values of rationalization. In this context, we discuss Weber’s work on the economy, religion, law, the polity, the city, and art forms. Weber argued that rationalization was sweeping across all of these institutions in the West, whereas there were major barriers to this process in the rest of the world.

Weber’s thoughts on rationalization and various other issues are illustrated in his work on the relationship between religion and capitalism. At one level, this is a series of studies of the relationship between ideas (religious ideas) and the development of the spirit of capitalism and, ultimately, capitalism itself. At another level, it is a study of how the West developed a distinctively rational religious system (Calvinism) that played a key role in the rise of a rational economic system (capitalism). Weber also studied other societies, in which he found religious systems (e.g., Confucianism, Taoism, and Hinduism) that inhibit the growth of a rational economic system. It is this kind of majestic sweep over the history of many sectors of the world that helps give Weberian theory its enduring significance.
Notes

1. Ironically, Weber did seem (as we see later in this chapter) to argue in his substantive work that there was such a causal agent in society—rationalization.

2. In fact, Weber’s ideal types are collective concepts.

3. Udehn (1981) argued that one exception is Weber’s analysis of the behavior of leaders.

4. The term charisma is used in Weber’s work in a variety of other ways and contexts as well; see Miyahara (1983).

5. Here and elsewhere in his work Weber adopts a Marxian interest in the means of production. This is paralleled by his concern with alienation, not only in the economic sector but throughout social life (science, politics, etc.).

6. It might be argued that there is no single definition because the various forms of rationality are so different from one another that they preclude such a definition. We would like to thank Jere Cohen for this point.

7. In the 1920 introduction to The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber focused on “a specially trained organization of officials” (bureaucracy) in his discussion of rationalization, but he also mentioned capitalism in the same context as “the most fateful force in our modern life.”

8. Of course, these are not completely distinct because large capitalistic enterprises are one of the places in which we find bureaucracies (Weber, 1922–1923/1958:299). However, Weber also saw the possibility that bureaucracies can stand in opposition to, can impede, capitalism.

9. However, Mark Schneider argued that Weber overstated the case and that in spite of rationalization, parts of the world continue to be enchanted: “Enchantment, we suggest, is part of our normal condition, and far from having fled with the rise of science [one of Weber’s rationalized systems], it continues to exist (though often unrecognized) wherever our capacity to explain the world’s behavior is slim, that is, where neither science nor practical knowledge seem of much utility” (1993:x). Ritzer (2010) argued that disenchanted realms will try to find ways to, at least temporarily, be re-enchanted. This is particularly true of consumer-driven economic systems that depend on enchanted consumers.

9 Georg Simmel
Chapter Outline

Primary Concerns
Individual Consciousness and Individuality
Social Interaction (“Association”)
Social Structures and Worlds
Objective Culture
The Philosophy of Money
Secrecy: A Case Study in Simmel’s Sociology
Criticisms
Contemporary Applications

The impact of the ideas of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) on American sociological theory, as well as sociological theory in general, differs markedly from that of the three theorists discussed in the preceding three chapters of this book (see Dahme, 1990; Featherstone, 1991; Helle, 2005; Kaern, Phillips, and Cohen, 1990; for a good overview of the secondary literature on Simmel, see Frisby, 1994; Nedelmann, 2001; Scaff, 2011). Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, despite their later significance, had relatively little influence on American theory in the early twentieth century. Simmel was much better known to the early American sociologists (Jaworski, 1997). Simmel was eclipsed by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, although he is far more influential today than classical thinkers such as Comte and Spencer. In recent years we have seen an increase in Simmel’s impact on sociological theory (Aronowitz, 1994; D. Levine, 1985, 1989, 1997; Scaff, 2011) as a result of the growing influence of one of his most important works, *The Philosophy of Money* (for an analysis of this work, see Poggi, 1993), the linking of his ideas to postmodern social theory (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993, 1998), and the translation into English of Simmel’s later works on life philosophy (Simmel, 1916/2005, 1918/2011).
Primary Concerns

Although we focus on Simmel's contributions to sociological theory, we should point out that he was primarily a philosopher and that many of his publications dealt with philosophical issues (e.g., ethics and metaphysics) and other philosophers, including Plato, Kant, Spinoza, and Nietzsche (Helle, 2013).
Georg Simmel was born in the heart of Berlin on March 1, 1858. He studied a wide range of subjects at the University of Berlin. However, his first effort to produce a dissertation was rejected, and one of his professors remarked, “We would do him a great service if we do not encourage him further in this direction” (Frisby, 1984:23). Despite this, Simmel persevered and received his doctorate in philosophy in 1881. He remained at the university in a teaching capacity until 1914, although he occupied a relatively unimportant position as Privatdozent from 1885 to 1900. In the latter position, Simmel served as an unpaid lecturer whose livelihood was dependent on student fees. Despite his marginality, Simmel did rather well in this position, largely because he was an excellent lecturer and attracted large numbers of (paying) students (Frisby, 1981:17; Salomon, 1963/1997). His style was so popular that even cultured members of Berlin society were drawn to his lectures, which became public events (Leck, 2000).

Simmel’s marginality is paralleled by the fact that he was a somewhat contradictory and therefore bewildering person:

If we put together the testimonials left by relatives, friends, students, contemporaries, we find a number of sometimes contradictory indications concerning Georg Simmel. He is depicted by some as being tall and slender, by others as being short and as bearing a forlorn expression. His appearance is reported to be unattractive, typically Jewish, but also intensely intellectual and noble. He is reported to be hard-working, but also humorous and overarticulate as a lecturer. Finally we hear that he was intellectually brilliant [Lukács, 1991:145], friendly, well-disposed—but also that inside he was irrational, opaque, and wild.

(Schnabel, cited in Poggi, 1993:55)

Simmel wrote innumerable articles (“The Metropolis and Mental Life”) and books (The Philosophy of Money). He was well known and influential in German academic circles. His Berlin home was a center of cultural life where he and his wife Gertrud hosted important figures, including poets Rainer Rilke and Stefan George, philosophers Edmund Husserl and Heinrich Rickert, and sociologists Max and Marianne Weber (Helle, 2013). Hans-Georg Gadamer noted that Simmel’s essays on metaphysics influenced
philosopher Martin Heidegger’s (1953/2010) monumental book Being and Time. Simmel even had an international following, especially in the United States, where his work was of great significance in the birth of sociology. Finally, in 1900, Simmel received official recognition, a purely honorary title at the University of Berlin, which did not give him full academic status. Simmel tried to obtain many academic positions, but he failed in spite of the support of such scholars as Max Weber.

Despite the fact that he was a baptized Protestant, one of the reasons for Simmel’s failure was that he was a Jew in a nineteenth-century Germany rife with anti-Semitism (Birnbaum, 2008; Kasler, 1985). Thus, in a report on Simmel written to a minister of education, Simmel was described as “an Israelite through and through, in his external appearance, in his bearing and in his mode of thought” (Frisby, 1981:25). Another reason was the kind of work that he did. Many of his articles appeared in newspapers and magazines; they were written for an audience more general than simply academic sociologists (Rammstedt, 1991). In addition, because he did not hold a regular academic appointment, he was forced to earn his living through public lectures. Simmel’s audience, both for his writings and for his lectures, was more the intellectual public than professional sociologists, and this tended to lead to derisive judgments from fellow professionals. For example, one of his contemporaries damned him because “his influence remained … upon the general atmosphere and affected, above all, the higher levels of journalism” (Troeltsch, cited in Frisby, 1981:13).

Simmel’s personal failures can also be linked to the low esteem that German academicians of that day had for sociology. In 1914 Simmel finally obtained a regular academic appointment at a minor university (Strasbourg), but he once again felt estranged. On the one hand, he regretted leaving his audience of Berlin intellectuals. Thus, his wife wrote to Max Weber’s wife: “Georg has taken leave of the auditorium very badly…. The students were very affectionate and sympathetic…. It was a departure at the full height of life” (Frisby, 1981:29). On the other hand, Simmel did not feel a part of the life of his new university. Thus, he wrote to Mrs. Weber: “There is hardly anything to report from us. We live … a cloistered, closed-off, indifferent, desolate external existence. Academic activity is = 0, the people … alien and inwardly hostile” (Frisby, 1981:32).

World War I started soon after Simmel’s appointment at Strasbourg; lecture halls were turned into military hospitals, and students went off to war. Thus, Simmel remained a marginal figure in German academia until his death in 1918. He never did have a normal academic career. Nevertheless, Simmel attracted a large academic following in his day, and his fame as a scholar has, if anything, grown over the years.

With the exception of his contribution to the primarily macroscopic conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1908/1955), Georg Simmel is best known as a microsociologist who played a significant role in the development of small-group research (Caplow, 1968), symbolic interactionism, and exchange theory. All of Simmel’s contributions in these areas reflect his belief that sociologists should study primarily forms and types of social interaction. Robert Nisbet presents this view of Simmel’s contribution to sociology:

It is the microsociological character of Simmel’s work that may always give him an edge in timeliness over the other pioneers. He did not disdain the small and the intimate elements of human association, nor did he ever lose sight of the primacy of human beings, of concrete individuals, in his analysis of institutions.

(Nisbet, 1959:480)

David Frisby makes a similar point: “The grounding of sociology in some psychological categories may be one reason why Simmel’s sociology has proved attractive not merely to the interactionist but also to social psychology” (1984:57; see also Frisby, 1992:20–41). However, it is often forgotten that Simmel’s microsociological work on the forms of interaction is embedded in a broader theory of the relations between individuals and the larger society.

Levels and Areas of Concern
Simmel had a much more complicated and sophisticated theory of social reality than he commonly is given credit for in contemporary American sociology. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (1978) argued that there are four basic levels of concern in Simmel's work. First are his microscopic assumptions about the psychological components of social life. Second, on a slightly larger scale, is his interest in the sociological components of interpersonal relationships. Third, and most macroscopic, is his work on the structure of, and changes in, the social and cultural “spirit” of his times. Not only did Simmel operate with this image of a three-tiered social reality, but he adopted the principle of emergence (Sawyer, 2005), the idea that the higher levels emerge out of the lower levels: “Further development replaces the immediacy of interacting forces with the creation of higher supra-individual formations, which appear as independent representatives of these forces and absorb and mediate the relations between individuals” (Simmel, 1907/1978:174). He also said, “If society is to be an autonomous object of an independent science, then it can only be so through the fact that, out of the sum of the individual elements that constitute it, a new entity emerges; otherwise all problems of social science would only be those of individual psychology” (Simmel, cited in Frisby, 1984:56–57).

Overarching these three tiers is a fourth that involves ultimate metaphysical principles of life. These eternal truths affect all of Simmel's work and, as we will see, lead to his image of the future direction of the world.

This concern with multiple levels of social reality is reflected in Simmel's definition of three separable problem “areas” in sociology, which he described in “The Problem Areas of Sociology” (1917/1950). The first he described as “pure” sociology. In this area, psychological variables are combined with forms of interactions. Although Simmel clearly assumed that actors have creative mental abilities, he gave little explicit attention to this aspect of social reality. His most microscopic work is with the forms that interaction takes as well as with the types of people who engage in interaction (Korllos, 1994). The forms include subordination, superordination, exchange, conflict, and sociability. In his work on types, he differentiated between positions in the interactional structure, such as “competitor” and “coquette,” and orientations to the world, such as “miser,” “spendthrift,” “stranger,” and “adventurer.” At the intermediate level is Simmel’s “general” sociology, dealing with the social and cultural products of human history. Here Simmel manifested his larger-scale interests in the group, the structure, and history of societies and cultures. Finally, in Simmel’s “philosophical” sociology, he dealt with his views on the basic nature, and inevitable fate, of humankind. Throughout this chapter, we touch on all these levels and sociologies. We find that although Simmel sometimes separated the different levels and sociologies, he more often integrated them into a broader totality.

**Dialectical Thinking**

Simmel's way of dealing with the interrelationships among three basic levels of social reality (leaving out his fourth, metaphysical, level) gave his sociology a dialectical character reminiscent of Marx's sociology (D. Levine, 1991b:109; Schermer and Jary, 2013). A dialectical approach, as we saw earlier, is multicausal and multidirectional, integrates fact and value, rejects the idea that there are hard-and-fast dividing lines between social phenomena, focuses on social relations (B. Turner, 1986), looks not only at the present but also at the past and the future, and is deeply concerned with both conflicts and contradictions.

In spite of the similarities between Marx and Simmel in their use of a dialectical approach, there are
important differences between them. Of greatest importance is the fact that they focused on very different aspects of the social world and offered very different images of the future of the world.

Simmel manifested his commitment to the dialectic in various ways (Featherstone, 1991:7). For one thing, Simmel's sociology was always concerned with relationships (Lichtblau and Ritter, 1991), especially interaction (association). More generally, Simmel was a “methodological relationist” (Ritzer and Gindoff, 1992) operating with the “principle that everything interacts in some way with everything else” (Simmel, cited in Frisby, 1992:9). Overall he was ever attuned to dualisms, conflicts, and contradictions in whatever realm of the social world he happened to be working on (Sellerberg, 1994). Donald Levine stated that this perspective reflects Simmel's belief that “the world can best be understood in terms of conflicts and contrasts between opposed categories” (1971:xxxv). Rather than try to deal with this mode of thinking throughout Simmel's work, let us illustrate it from his work on one of his forms of interaction—fashion. Simmel used a similar mode of dialectical thinking in most of his essays on social forms and social types, but this discussion of fashion amply illustrates his method of dealing with these phenomena. We will also deal with the dialectic in Simmel's thoughts on subjective-objective culture and the concepts of “more-life” and “more-than-life.”

**Fashion**

In one of his typically fascinating and dualistic essays, Simmel (1904/1971; Gronow, 1997; Nedelmann, 1990) illustrated the contradictions in fashion in a variety of ways. On the one hand, fashion is a form of social relationship that allows those who wish to conform to the demands of the group to do so. On the other hand, fashion also provides the norm from which those who wish to be individualistic can deviate. Fashion involves a historical process as well: at the initial stage, everyone accepts what is fashionable; inevitably, individuals deviate from this; and finally, in the process of deviation, they may adopt a whole new view of what is in fashion. Fashion is also dialectical in the sense that the success and spread of any given fashion lead to its eventual failure. That is, the distinctiveness of something leads to its being considered fashionable; however, as large numbers of people come to accept it, it ceases to be distinctive and hence it loses its attractiveness. Still another duality involves the role of the leader of a fashion movement. Such a person leads the group, paradoxically, by following the fashion better than anyone else, that is, by adopting it more determinedly. Finally, Simmel argued that not only does following what is in fashion involve dualities, so does the effort on the part of some people to be out of fashion. Unfashionable people view those who follow a fashion as being imitators and themselves as mavericks, but Simmel argued that the latter are simply engaging in an inverse form of imitation. Individuals may avoid what is in fashion because they are afraid that they, like their peers, will lose their individuality, but in Simmel's view, such a fear is hardly a sign of great personal strength and independence. In sum, Simmel noted that in fashion “all … leading antithetical tendencies … are represented in one way or another” (1904/1971:317).

Simmel's dialectical thinking can be seen at a more general level as well. As we will see throughout this chapter, he was most interested in the conflicts and contradictions that exist between the individual and the larger social and cultural structures that individuals construct. These structures ultimately come to have a life of their own, over which the individual can exert little or no control.
Life

Recent translations into English of Simmel’s later writings draw attention to the importance of the concept of life to Simmel’s philosophy and sociology. Simmel is an important figure in the Lebensphilosophie (life philosophy) movement, which included earlier figures such as Goethe and Nietzsche, and Simmel’s contemporaries Henri Bergson and Wilhelm Dilthey. Life is a concept that provides a touchstone for Simmel’s entire philosophy and sociology. According to Simmel, reality is always changing. Life is the concept that Simmel used to describe the changing nature of reality: “life takes the form of a process with changing contents” (1916/2005:5). Life is flux and flow rather than stability or fixity (Pyyhtinen, 2010). Put another way, life is the process of constant becoming rather than a settled, easily grasped, state of being. Even though in his sociology Simmel regularly described stable social forms, it should not be forgotten that these forms always emerge out of a more basic ever-changing life process.

The concept of life has important implications for sociology. Human beings and social forms emerge out of the flux of life. The social, as we know it, is an expression of life. Simmel said that life is given concrete form through human creation and activity. In fact, Simmel argued that life only comes to know itself when it becomes fixed as a stable social form. Here we once again see Simmel’s dialectical approach. The flux of life and the fixity of social forms exist in relationship to one another. Life is not simply flow and change, but better understood as that which creates social forms and then overcomes or “transcends” those forms. Adding further nuance to the definition of life, Simmel said that “life takes place as a ‘reaching beyond itself’” (1918/2011:8). The movement of life, then, is not an undirected free flow of life energies, but rather the constant movement beyond the social forms created by humans. Our lives and our societies have the characteristics of change and movement because they are always infused with the energy of life. Despite the complexity of the ideas, Simmel’s life philosophy is quite straightforward: humans live in a world of constant change and flow. Humans give expression to that life through the creation of social and cultural forms. As life expressions, social forms are never finally settled but always open to further transformation or self-transcendence.

More-Life and More-Than-Life

Related to this is Simmel’s concept of more-life and more-than-life. In discussing the emergence of social and cultural forms, Simmel took a position very similar to some of Marx’s ideas. Marx used the concept of the fetishism of commodities to illustrate the separation between people and their products. For Marx, this separation reached its apex in capitalism, could be overcome only in the future socialist society, and thus was a specific historical phenomenon. But for Simmel this separation is inherent in the nature of human life. In philosophical terms, there is a contradiction between “more-life” and “more-than-life” (G. Oakes, 1984:6; Weingartner, 1959).

The issue of more-life and more-than-life is central to the first essay of Simmel’s View of Life, titled “Life as Transcendence” (1918/2011). As described earlier, transcendence is immanent to life, meaning that life is that which constantly moves beyond itself. People possess a doubly transcendent capability. First, because of their restless, creative capacities (more-life), people are able to transcend themselves. Humans are always growing,
changing, and becoming something different or “more” than they were before. Second, this transcendent, creative ability makes it possible for people to constantly produce sets of objects and social forms that transcend them. The objective existence of these phenomena (more-than-life) comes to stand in opposition to the creative forces (more-life) that produced the objects in the first place. In other words, social life “creates and sets free from itself something that is not life but ‘which has its own significance and follows its own law’” (Simmel, cited in Weingartner, 1959:53). Life is found in the unity, and the conflict, between the two. As Simmel concluded, “Life finds its essence, its process, in being more-life and more-than-life” (1918/2011:17).

At first glance, the concept of more-than-life offers an image of the world quite close to Max Weber. Simmel, like Weber, saw the world as increasingly populated by social and cultural forms that escape people’s control. More-than-life confronts people as forces that limit and oppose their creative, subjective capacities. Weber calls this the iron cage of modernity and Simmel refers to this as the growth of objective culture. Yet, on this point Simmel is more optimistic than Weber. Even though over time more-than-life grows increasingly distant from more-life, it nevertheless remains an expression of more-life. Even the most distant and alienating social forms (e.g., money, bureaucracy) are still connected to the human creative impulse and as such can be recovered as a human life expression. We say more about several of these issues in the following sections, which deal with Simmel’s thoughts on the major components of social reality. (For more on the intellectual relationship between Simmel and Weber, see Scaff, 1989:121–151.)
Individual Consciousness and Individuality

Simmel’s sociology focused primarily on forms of association and interactions between persons. In contrast to Weber he was not a methodological individualist, but rather an interactionist who assumed that humans could only be understood as beings who exist in relationship to one another. This said, the individual was a core theoretical concept for Simmel. Even though relationships are not reducible to individual psychological processes, they are nevertheless dependent upon psychological processes. Most basically, Simmel believed that individuals are the “bearers” of the life process (1918/2011:9). As bearers of the life process, individuals are creative beings always driven to transcend that which is fixed and stable. It is the creativity of individuals working in relationship with each other that makes possible the emergence of social forms (Helle, 2013). As Frisby put it, the bases of social life to Simmel were “conscious individuals or groups of individuals who interact with one another for a variety of motives, purposes, and interests” (1984:61). This interest in creativity is manifest in Simmel’s discussion of the diverse forms of interaction, the ability of actors to create social structures, as well as the disastrous effects those structures have on the creativity of individuals.

Moreover, although he did not examine psychological life in detail, Simmel nevertheless assumed a number of additional psychological capacities necessary for the development and continued operation of social life. For example, all of Simmel’s discussions of the forms of interaction imply that actors must be consciously oriented to one another. Thus, interaction in a stratified system requires that superordinates and subordinates orient themselves to each other. The interaction would cease and the stratification system would collapse if a process of mutual orientation did not exist. The same is true of all other forms of interaction. Also, even though Simmel believed that social (and cultural) structures come to have a life of their own, he realized that people must conceptualize such structures in order for them to have an effect on the people. Simmel stated that society is not simply “out there” but is also “my representation”—something dependent on the activity of consciousness” (1908/1959a:339). Simmel also had a sense of individual conscience and of the fact that the norms and values of society become internalized in individual consciousness. The existence of norms and values both internally and externally explains the dual character of the moral command: that on the one hand, it confronts us as an impersonal order to which we simply have to submit, but that, on the other, no external power, but only our most private and internal impulses, imposes it upon us. At any rate, here is one of the cases where the individual, within his own consciousness, repeats the relationships which exist between him, as a total personality, and the group.

(Simmel, 1908/1950a:254)

This very modern conception of internalization is a relatively undeveloped assumption in Simmel’s work.

In addition, Simmel had a conception of people’s ability to confront themselves mentally, to set themselves apart from their own actions, a view that is very similar to the views of George Herbert Mead (see Chapter
and the symbolic interactionists (Simmel, 1907/1978:64). The actor can take in external stimuli, assess them, try out different courses of action, and then decide what to do. Because of these mental capacities, the actor is not simply enslaved by external forces. But there is a paradox in Simmel's conception of the actor's mental capacities. The mind can keep people from being enslaved by external stimuli, but it also has the capacity to reify social reality, to create the very objects that come to enslave it. As Simmel said, “Our mind has a remarkable ability to think of contents as being independent of the act of thinking” (1907/1978:65). Thus, although their intelligence enables people to avoid being enslaved by the same external stimuli that constrain lower animals, it also creates the structures and institutions that constrain their thoughts and actions.

Finally, individuality was important to Simmel as an ethical or moral ideal. Horst Helle (2013:36) wrote, “For Simmel autonomy and individuality of the person are values which he does not question or discuss; they are taken for granted as goals that must be pursued.” Precisely because the individual is the source of creativity Simmel defended the modern liberal concept of individuality. As Helle pointed out, Simmel understood individuality as an evolutionary achievement connected to the development of modern, capitalist, urban societies. In particular, capitalism institutionalizes competition as the basis for social life. Competition encourages individual creativity and the development of further social forms. This said, Simmel was careful. He did not embrace a laissez-faire view of capitalism and competition but rather saw competition itself as a social form that must be fostered. For these reasons, Simmel was critical of socialism. Socialism eliminated competition between individuals and thus threatened the creativity that fuels the emergence of novel social forms. In effect, Simmel argued that socialism destroys the creativity of life in the name of society.
Social Interaction (“Association”)

Georg Simmel is best known in contemporary sociology for his contributions to our understanding of the patterns, or forms, of social interaction. He expressed his interest in this level of social reality in this way:

We are dealing here with microscopic-molecular processes within human material, so to speak. These processes are the actual occurrences that are concatenated or hypostatized into those macrocosmic, solid units and systems. That people look at one another and are jealous of one another; that they exchange letters or have dinner together; that apart from all tangible interests they strike one another as pleasant or unpleasant; that gratitude for altruistic acts makes for inseparable union; that one asks another to point out a certain street; that people dress and adorn themselves for each other—these are a few casually chosen illustrations from the whole range of relations that play between one person and another. They may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious, ephemeral or of grave consequence, but they incessantly tie men together. At each moment such threads are spun, dropped, taken up again, displaced by others, interwoven with others. These interactions among the atoms of society are accessible only to psychological microscopy.

(Simmel, 1908/1959b:327–328)

Simmel made clear here that one of his primary interests was interaction (association) among conscious actors and that his intent was to look at a wide range of interactions that may seem trivial at some times but crucially important at others. His was not a Durkheimian expression of interest in social facts but a declaration of a smaller-scale focus for sociology.

Because Simmel sometimes took an exaggerated position on the importance of interaction in his sociology, many have lost sight of his insights into the larger-scale aspects of social reality. At times, for example, he equated society with interaction: “Society … is only the synthesis or the general term for the totality of these specific interactions…. ‘Society’ is identical with the sum total of these relations” (Simmel, 1907/1978:175). Such statements may be taken as a reaffirmation of his interest in interaction, but in his general and philosophical sociologies, Simmel held a much larger-scale conception of society as well as culture.

Interaction: Forms and Types

One of Simmel’s dominant concerns was the form rather than the content of social interaction. This concern stemmed from Simmel’s identification with the Kantian tradition in philosophy, in which much is made of the difference between form and content. Simmel’s position here, however, was quite simple. The real world is composed of innumerable and constantly changing events, actions and interactions, and so forth. To cope with this maze of reality, people order it by imposing patterns, or forms, on it. Thus, instead of a bewildering array of specific events, the actor is confronted with a limited number of forms. In Simmel’s view, the sociologist’s task is to do precisely what the layperson does, that is, impose a limited number of forms on
social reality, on interaction in particular, so that it may be better analyzed. This methodology generally involves extracting commonalities that are found in a wide array of specific interactions. For example, the superordination and subordination forms of interaction are found in a wide range of settings, “in the state as well as in a religious community, in a band of conspirators as in an economic association, in art school as in a family” (Simmel, 1908/1959b:317). Donald Levine, one of Simmel’s foremost contemporary analysts, described Simmel’s method of doing formal interactional sociology in this way: “His method is to select some bounded, finite phenomenon from the world of flux; to examine the multiplicity of elements which compose it; and to ascertain the cause of their coherence by disclosing its form. Secondarily, he investigates the origins of this form and its structural implications” (1971:xxxi). More specifically, Levine pointed out that “forms are the patterns exhibited by the associations” of people (1981b:65).

Simmel’s interest in the forms of social interaction has been subjected to various criticisms. For example, he has been accused of imposing order where there is none and of producing a series of unrelated studies that in the end really impose no better order on the complexities of social reality than does the layperson. Some of these criticisms are valid only if we focus on Simmel’s concern with forms of interaction, his formal sociology, and ignore the other types of sociology he practiced.

However, there are a number of ways to defend Simmel’s approach to formal sociology. First, it is close to reality, as reflected by the innumerable real-life examples employed by Simmel. Second, it does not impose arbitrary and rigid categories on social life but tries instead to allow the forms to emerge from social life. It is important to remember that for Simmel, form always existed in relationship to the creative processes of life. The goal was not to impose order on social life per se, but to show how people always organize and reorganize their lives through the creation of social forms. It is best then to see Simmel’s description of forms not as set in stone depictions of life, but rather as a tool to animate the tension between life and form. Third, Simmel’s approach does not employ a general theoretical schema into which all aspects of the social world are forced. He thus avoided the reification of a theoretical schema that plagues a theorist like Talcott Parsons. Finally, formal sociology militates against the poorly conceptualized empiricism that is characteristic of much of sociology. Simmel certainly used empirical “data,” but they are subordinated to his effort to impose some order on the bewildering world of social reality.

**Social Geometry**

In Simmel’s formal sociology, one sees most clearly his effort to develop a “geometry” of social relations. Two of the geometric coefficients that interested him are numbers and distance (others are position, valence, self-involvement, and symmetry [D. Levine, 1981b]).

**Numbers**

Simmel’s interest in the impact of numbers of people on the quality of interaction can be seen in his discussion of the difference between a dyad and a triad.

*Dyad and Triad.* For Simmel (1950) there was a crucial difference between the *dyad* (two-person group) and the *triad* (three-person group). The addition of a third person causes a radical and fundamental change.
Increasing the membership beyond three has nowhere near the same impact as does adding a third member. Unlike all other groups, the dyad does not achieve a meaning beyond the two individuals involved. There is no independent group structure in a dyad; there is nothing more to the group than the two separable individuals. Thus, each member of a dyad retains a high level of individuality. The individual is not lowered to the level of the group. This is not the case in a triad. A triad does have the possibility of obtaining a meaning beyond the individuals involved. There is likely to be more to a triad than the individuals involved. It is likely to develop an independent group structure. As a result, there is a greater threat to the individuality of the members. A triad can have a general leveling effect on the members.

With the addition of a third party to the group, a number of new social roles become possible. For example, the third party can take the role of arbitrator or mediator in disputes within the group. Then the third party can use disputes between the other two for his or her own gain or become an object of competition between the other two parties. The third member also can intentionally foster conflict between the other two parties in order to gain superiority (divide and rule). A stratification system and an authority structure then can emerge. The movement from dyad to triad is essential to the development of social structures that can become separate from, and dominant over, individuals. Such a possibility does not exist in a dyad.

The process that is begun in the transition from a dyad to a triad continues as larger and larger groups and, ultimately, societies emerge. In these large social structures, the individual, increasingly separated from the structure of society, grows more and more alone, isolated, and segmented. This results finally in a dialectical relationship between individuals and social structures: “According to Simmel, the socialized individual always remains in a dual relation toward society: he is incorporated within it and yet stands against it…. The individual is determined, yet determining; acted upon, yet self-actuating” (Coser, 1965:11). The contradiction here is that “society allows the emergence of individuality and autonomy, but it also impedes it” (Coser, 1965:11).

**Group Size.** At a more general level, there is Simmel's (1908/1971a) ambivalent attitude toward the impact of group size. On the one hand, he took the position that the increase in the size of a group or society increases individual freedom. A small group or society is likely to control the individual completely. However, in a larger society, the individual is likely to be involved in a number of groups, each of which controls only a small portion of his or her total personality. In other words, “Individuality in being and action generally increases to the degree that the social circle encompassing the individual expands” (Simmel, 1908/1971a:252). However, Simmel took the view that large societies create a set of problems that ultimately threaten individual freedom. For example, he saw the masses as likely to be dominated by one idea, the simplest idea. The physical proximity of a mass makes people suggestible and more likely to follow simplistic ideas, to engage in mindless, emotional actions.

Perhaps most important, in terms of Simmel's interest in forms of interaction, is that increasing size and differentiation tend to loosen the bonds between individuals and leave in their place much more distant, impersonal, and segmental relationships. Paradoxically, the large group that frees the individual simultaneously threatens that individuality. Also paradoxical is Simmel's belief that one way for individuals to
cope with the threat of the mass society is to immerse themselves in small groups such as the family.

**Distance**

Another of Simmel’s concerns in social geometry was distance. Levine offered this summation of Simmel’s views on the role of distance in social relationships: “The properties of forms and the meanings of things are a function of the relative distances between individuals and other individuals or things” (1971:xxxiv). This concern with distance is manifest in various places in Simmel’s work. We discuss it within two different contexts—Simmel’s massive *The Philosophy of Money* and one of his cleverest essays, “The Stranger.”

In *The Philosophy of Money* (1907/1978), Simmel enunciated some general principles about value—and about what makes things valuable—that served as the basis for his analysis of money. Because we deal with this work in detail later in this chapter, we discuss this issue only briefly here. The essential point is that the value of something is determined by its distance from the actor. It is not valuable if it is either too close and too easy to obtain or too distant and too difficult to obtain. Objects that are attainable, but only with great effort, are the most valuable.

Distance also plays a central role in Simmel’s “The Stranger” (1908/1971b; McVeigh and Sikkink, 2005; Tabboni, 1995), an essay on a type of actor who is neither too close nor too far. If he (or she) were too close, he would no longer be a stranger, but if he were too far, he would cease to have any contact with the group. The interaction that the stranger engages in with the group members involves a combination of closeness and distance. The peculiar distance of the stranger from the group allows him to have a series of unusual interaction patterns with the members. For example, the stranger can be more objective in his relationships with the group members. Because he is a stranger, other group members feel more comfortable expressing confidences to him. In these and other ways, a pattern of coordination and consistent interaction emerges between the stranger and the other group members. The stranger becomes an organic member of the group. But Simmel not only considered the stranger a social type, he considered strangeness a form of social interaction. A degree of strangeness, involving a combination of nearness and remoteness, enters into all social relationships, even the most intimate. Thus, we can examine a wide range of specific interactions in order to discover the degree of strangeness found in each.

Although geometric dimensions enter a number of Simmel's types and forms, there is much more to them than simply geometry. The types and forms are constructs that Simmel used to gain a greater understanding of a wide range of interaction patterns.

**Social Types**

We have already encountered one of Simmel’s types, the stranger; others include the miser, the spendthrift, the adventurer, and the nobleman. To illustrate his mode of thinking in this area, we focus on one of his types, the poor.

**The Poor**

As is typical of types in Simmel’s work, the poor were defined in terms of social relationships, as being aided
by other people or at least having the right to that aid. Here Simmel quite clearly did not hold the view that poverty is defined by a quantity, or rather a lack of quantity, of money.

Although Simmel focused on the poor in terms of characteristic relationships and interaction patterns, he also used the occasion of his essay “The Poor” (1908/1971c) to develop a wide range of interesting insights into the poor and poverty. It was characteristic of Simmel to offer a profusion of insights in every essay. Indeed, this is one of his great claims to fame. For example, Simmel argued that a reciprocal set of rights and obligations defines the relationship between the needy and the givers. The needy have the right to receive aid, and this right makes receiving aid less painful. Conversely, the giver has the obligation to give to the needy. Simmel also took the functionalist position that aid to the poor by society helps support the system. Society requires aid to the poor “so that the poor will not become active and dangerous enemies of society, so as to make their reduced energies more productive, and so as to prevent the degeneration of their progeny” (Simmel, 1908/1971c:154). Thus, aid to the poor is for the sake of society, not so much for the poor per se. The state plays a key role here, and, as Simmel saw it, the treatment of the poor grows increasingly impersonal as the mechanism for giving aid becomes more bureaucratized.

Simmel also had a relativistic view of poverty; that is, the poor are not simply those who stand at the bottom of society. From his point of view, poverty is found in all social strata. This concept foreshadowed the later sociological concept of relative deprivation. If people who are members of the upper classes have less than their peers do, they are likely to feel poor in comparison to them. Therefore, government programs aimed at eradicating poverty can never succeed. Even if those at the bottom are elevated, many people throughout the stratification system will still feel poor in comparison to their peers.

Social Forms

As with social types, Simmel looked at a wide range of social forms, including exchange, conflict, prostitution, and sociability. We can illustrate Simmel’s (1908/1971d) work on social forms through his discussion of domination, that is, superordination and subordination.

Superordination and Subordination

Superordination and subordination have a reciprocal relationship. The leader does not want to determine completely the thoughts and actions of others. Rather, the leader expects the subordinate to react either positively or negatively. Neither this nor any other form of interaction can exist without mutual relationships. Even in the most oppressive form of domination, subordinates have at least some degree of personal freedom.

To most people, superordination involves an effort to eliminate completely the independence of subordinates, but Simmel argued that a social relationship would cease to exist if this were the case.

Simmel asserted that one can be subordinated to an individual, a group, or an objective force. Leadership by a single individual generally leads to a tightly knit group either in support of or in opposition to the leader. Even when opposition arises in such a group, discord can be resolved more easily when the parties stand under the same higher power. Subordination under a plurality can have very uneven effects. On the one hand, the
objectivity of rule by a plurality may make for greater unity in the group than does the more arbitrary rule of an individual. On the other hand, hostility is likely to be engendered among subordinates if they do not get the personal attention of a leader.

Simmel found subordination under an objective principle to be most offensive, perhaps because human relationships and social interactions are eliminated. People feel they are determined by an impersonal law that they have no ability to affect. Simmel saw subordination to an individual as freer and more spontaneous: “Subordination under a person has an element of freedom and dignity in comparison with which all obedience to laws has something mechanical and passive” (1908/1971d:115). Even worse is subordination to objects (e.g., icons), which Simmel found a “humiliatingly harsh and unconditional kind of subordination” (1908/1971d:115). Because the individual is dominated by a thing, “he himself psychologically sinks to the category of mere thing” (Simmel, 1908/1971d:117).

Social Forms and Simmel’s Larger Problematic

Guy Oakes (1984) linked Simmel’s discussion of forms to his basic problematic, the growing gap between objective and subjective culture. He stated that in “Simmel’s view, the discovery of objectivity—the independence of things from the condition of their subjective or psychological genesis—was the greatest achievement in the cultural history of the West” (G. Oakes, 1984:3). One of the ways in which Simmel addressed this objectivity was in his discussion of forms, but although such formalization and objectification were necessary and desirable, they could come to be quite undesirable:

On the one hand, forms are necessary conditions for the expression and the realization of the energies and interests of life. On the other hand, these forms become increasingly detached and remote from life. When this happens, a conflict develops between the process of life and the configurations in which it is expressed. Ultimately, this conflict threatens to nullify the relationship between life and form, and thus to destroy the conditions under which the process of life can be realized in autonomous structures.

(G. Oakes, 1984:4)
Social Structures and Worlds

Simmel said relatively little directly about the large-scale structures of society. In fact, at times, given his focus on patterns of interaction, he denied the existence of that level of social reality. A good example of this is found in his effort to define society, where he rejected the realist position exemplified by Emile Durkheim that society is a real, material entity. Lewis Coser noted, “He did not see society as a thing or an organism” (1965:5). Simmel was also uncomfortable with the nominalist conception that society is nothing more than a collection of isolated individuals. He adopted an intermediate position, conceiving of society as a set of interactions (Spykman, 1925/1966:88). “Society is merely the name for a number of individuals connected by ‘interaction’” (Simmel, cited in Coser, 1965:5).

Although Simmel enunciated this interactionist position, in much of his work he operated as a realist, as if society were a real material structure. This merely underlines the ongoing tension in Simmel’s work between life and form. Life always produces social and cultural forms that transcend the people who created them. These social forms then confront people as entities unto themselves: “Society transcends the individual and lives its own life which follows its own laws. It, too, confronts the individual with a historical, imperative firmness” (1908/1950a:258). Coser caught the essence of this aspect of Simmel’s thought: “The larger superindividual structures—the state, the clan, the family, the city, or the trade union—turn out to be but crystallizations of this interaction, even though they may attain autonomy and permanency and confront the individual as if they were alien powers” (1965:5).

In his last work, The View of Life, Simmel approached this phenomenon using the concept of “world.” World is another way of talking about the process through which the flux of life is transformed into stable form. World, Simmel wrote, “is a form through which we assemble the whole of the given … into a unity” (1918/2011:55). It describes a way of arranging the “stuff of the world” into a continuity (21). Moreover, for Simmel there was not one world but multiple worlds, each of which grasps the very same stuff of life in different and mutually exclusive ways. Unlike the relatively small-scale, microsociological forms described earlier, worlds are much more encompassing and thus have a macrosociological bent to them. Simmel discussed three particularly important worlds: science, religion, and art. Despite their common origin in life, each of these worlds organizes the contents of life in different ways. They allow for different kinds of human involvement with the world and the development of different kinds of social interactions. Thus, although the discussion of world is quite philosophical, it gives us a sense of large-scale social organization through worldviews.

Worlds, as Simmel discussed them, eventually turn upon their creators, shaping life rather than giving immediate expression to the needs and necessities of life. As we see in the next section, this formalization process tends to take on a rhythm and intensity of its own, increasingly distancing persons from their creations. World can turn against life. This said, Simmel wanted to make clear that the development of forms and worlds can also enrich life, each in unique ways. For example, more than any other worldview, religion has the unique ability to “give its contents immediate context and warmth, depth and value” (1918/2011:54). Simmel also described the economic world. Unlike the worlds of science, art, and religion, the economy is
particularly hostile to life. Even though science, art, and religion grow in size, objectivity, and distance from their moment of creation, Simmel suggested that there is something in the logic of these worlds that nevertheless tethers them to their original, more human, life expression. In contrast, of the economy he wrote,

The violent logic of its development does not depend upon the will of its subjects, nor on the meaning and necessities of their lives. The economy goes its necessary way, entirely as though men were there for its sake, but not it for the sake of man. Of all those worlds whose forms life’s development has produced in and from itself … surely none at its origin is so … in opposition to the real meaning and genuine demands of life with such ruthless objectivity, with such demonic violence as the modern economy. (1918/2011:59)

While this passage shows that Simmel’s critique of the modern economy can be as spirited and poetic as Marx’s critique, it should also be clear that he did not embrace socialism as an alternative to capitalism. Rather, as we see in the next few sections of this chapter, Simmel’s criticism is connected to a different set of processes associated with emergence of an increasingly objective culture and the role that money played in the development of that objective culture.
Objective Culture

One of the main focuses of Simmel’s historical and philosophical sociology is the cultural level of social reality, or what he called the “objective culture.” In Simmel’s view, people produce culture, but because of their ability to reify social reality, the cultural world and the social world come to have lives of their own, lives that increasingly dominate the actors who created, and daily re-create, them. “The cultural objects become more and more linked to each other in a self-contained world which has increasingly fewer contacts with the [individual] subjective psyche and its desires and sensibilities” (Coser, 1965:22). Although people always retain the capacity to create and re-create culture, the long-term trend of history is for culture to exert a more and more coercive force on the actor.
The Modern City: Historical Contexts

Although notoriously difficult to define, cities have existed in some form for thousands of years. Early cities were often walled, dense, self-sustaining settlements of people (Caves, 2005). The modern society, which has occupied the imagination of many classical and contemporary social theorists, including Simmel, emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the Industrial Revolution. During that period cities rapidly expanded, giving rise to modern metropolises. From 1750 to 1910 Berlin grew from a population of 219,000 to 2,071,000, London from 676,000 to 7,256,000, and Paris from 560,000 to 2,888,000 (Lees and Lees, 2007). The modern metropolis created new forms of social organization. Durkheim saw a relationship between the development of towns and cities, the growth of organic solidarity, and the intensification of the division of labor (Durkheim, 1893/1964). In his preface to Weber’s *The City*, Martindale (1958/1966) summarized the major infrastructural developments of the modern city: paved streets, super-bridges, cable cars and trolleys, telephone exchanges, postal systems, electric lighting, drainage systems, and firefighting systems. The modern city also introduced new social settings: ghettos and slums, apartment blocks, high streets, shopping areas, museums, theaters, government districts, parks, factories, industrial zones, and suburbs, among others.

The modern city restructured social life. It also gave rise to new types of people. Most famously the French poet Charles Baudelaire, who also coined the term *modernity*, is credited for his description in 1863 of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* is someone who immerses himself or herself (the *flâneuse*) in city crowds:

> The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. (Baudelaire, 1964:9)

Borrowing from Baudelaire, social theorist Walter Benjamin described the *flâneur* in his analysis of the Parisian Arcades. Arcades were the glass-covered, gas-lit streets that served as an early model for shopping malls. For Benjamin, the *flâneur* is a kind of window-shopper, someone who wanders the streets enjoying, although not necessarily submitting to, the “temptations of shops, of bistros” (1982/1999:417). In addition to types like the *flâneur*, Simmel described other types of city-dwellers including gamblers, prostitutes, the poor, members of secret societies, spendthrifts, misers, and, most famously, strangers.

The modern city is a unique environment which reorganizes social life, multiplies the settings available for human action, and creates new kinds of persons. It stimulated classical sociological thought and, in its contemporary global forms, continues to be a subject of sociological interest (Sassen, 2012).

The preponderance of objective over [individual] subjective culture that developed during the nineteenth century … this discrepancy seems to widen steadily. Every day and from all sides, the wealth of objective culture increases, but the individual mind can enrich the forms and content of its own development only by distancing itself still further from that culture and developing its own at a much slower pace.

(Simmel, 1907/1978:449)

In various places in his work, Simmel identified a number of components of the objective culture, for example, tools, means of transport, products of science, technology, arts, language, the intellectual sphere, conventional wisdom, religious dogma, philosophical systems, legal systems, moral codes, and ideals (e.g., the “fatherland”). The objective culture grows and expands in various ways. First, its absolute size grows with increasing modernization. This can be seen most obviously in the case of scientific knowledge, which is expanding exponentially, although this is just as true of most other aspects of the cultural realm. Second, the number of different components of the cultural realm also grows. Finally, and perhaps most important, the various
elements of the cultural world become more and more intertwined in an ever more powerful, self-contained world that is increasingly beyond the control of the actors (G. Oakes, 1984:12). Simmel not only was interested in describing the growth of objective culture but also was greatly disturbed by it: “Simmel was impressed—if not depressed—by the bewildering number and variety of human products which in the contemporary world surround and unceasingly impinge upon the individual” (Weingartner, 1959:33).

What worried Simmel most was the threat to individual culture posed by the growth of objective culture. Simmel’s personal sympathies were with a world dominated by individual culture, but he saw the possibility of such a world as more and more unlikely. It is this that Simmel described as the “tragedy of culture.” (We comment on this in detail in the discussion of The Philosophy of Money.) Simmel’s specific analysis of the growth of objective culture over individual subjective culture is simply one example of a general principle that dominates all of life: “The total value of something increases to the same extent as the value of its individual parts declines” (1907/1978:199).

We can relate Simmel’s general argument about objective culture to his more basic analysis of forms of interaction. In one of his best-known essays, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903/1971), Simmel analyzed the forms of interaction that take place in the modern city (Vidler, 1991). He saw the modern metropolis as the “genuine arena” of the growth of objective culture and the decline of individual culture. It is the scene of the predominance of the money economy, and money, as Simmel often made clear, has a profound effect on the nature of human relationships. The widespread use of money leads to an emphasis on calculability and rationality in all spheres of life. Thus, genuine human relationships decline, and social relationships tend to be dominated by a blasé and reserved attitude. Whereas the small town was characterized by greater feeling and emotionality, the modern city is characterized by a shallow intellectuality that matches the calculability needed by a money economy. The city is also the center of the division of labor, and as we have seen, specialization plays a central role in the production of an ever-expanding objective culture, with a corresponding decline in individual culture. The city is a “frightful leveler,” in which virtually everyone is reduced to emphasizing unfeeling calculability. It is more and more difficult to maintain individuality in the face of the expansion of objective culture (Lohmann and Wilkes, 1996).

It should be pointed out that in his essay on the city (as well as in many other places in his work) Simmel also discussed the liberating effect of this modern development. For example, he emphasized the fact that people are freer in the modern city than in the tight social confines of the small town. We say more about Simmel’s thoughts on the liberating impact of modernity at the close of the following section, devoted to Simmel’s book The Philosophy of Money.

Before we get to that work, it is necessary to indicate that one of the many ironies of Simmel’s influence on the development of sociology is that his micro-analytic work is used, but its broader implications are ignored almost totally. Take the example of Simmel’s work on exchange relationships. He saw exchange as the “purest and most developed kind” of interaction (Simmel, 1907/1978:82). Although all forms of interaction involve some sacrifice, it occurs most clearly in exchange relationships. Simmel thought of all social exchanges as involving “profit and loss.” Such an orientation was crucial to Simmel’s microsociological work and specifically...
to the development of his largely micro-oriented exchange theory. However, his thoughts on exchange are also expressed in his broader work on money. To Simmel, money is the purest form of exchange. In contrast to a barter economy, where the cycle ends when one object has been exchanged for another, an economy based on money allows for an endless series of exchanges. This possibility is crucial for Simmel because it provides the basis for the widespread development of social structures and objective culture. Consequently, money as a form of exchange represented for Simmel one of the root causes of the alienation of people in a modern reified social structure.

In his treatment of the city and exchange, one can see the elegance of Simmel's thinking as he related small-scale sociological forms of exchange to the development of modern society in its totality. Although this link can be found in his specific essays (especially Simmel, 1991), it is clearest in *The Philosophy of Money*. 
The Philosophy of Money

*The Philosophy of Money* (1907/1978) illustrates well the breadth and sophistication of Simmel's thinking (Deflem, 2003). It demonstrates conclusively that Simmel deserves at least as much recognition for his general theory as for his essays on microsociology, many of which can be seen as specific manifestations of his general theory.

Although the title makes it clear that Simmel's focus is money, his interest in that phenomenon is embedded in a set of his broader theoretical and philosophical concerns. For example, as we have already seen, Simmel was interested in the broad issue of value, and money can be seen as simply a specific form of value. At another level, Simmel was interested not in money per se but in its impact on such a wide range of phenomena, such as the “inner world” of actors and the objective culture as a whole. At still another level, he treated money as a specific phenomenon linked with a variety of other components of life, including “exchange, ownership, greed, extravagance, cynicism, individual freedom, the style of life, culture, the value of the personality, etc.” (Siegfried Kracauer, cited in Bottomore and Frisby, 1978:7). Finally, and most generally, Simmel saw money as a specific component of life capable of helping us understand the totality of life. As Bottomore and Frisby put it, Simmel sought no less than to extract “the totality of the spirit of the age from his analysis of money” (1978:7).

*The Philosophy of Money* has much in common with the work of Karl Marx. Like Marx, Simmel focused on capitalism and the problems created by a money economy. Despite this common ground, however, the differences are overwhelming. For example, Simmel saw the economic problems of his time as simply a specific manifestation of a more general cultural problem, the alienation of objective from subjective culture (Poggi, 1993). To Marx these problems were specific to capitalism, but to Simmel they were part of a universal tragedy—the increasing powerlessness of the individual in the face of the growth of objective culture. Whereas Marx's analysis is historically specific, Simmel's analysis seeks to extract timeless truths from the flux of human history. As Frisby wrote, “In his *The Philosophy of Money* … what is missing … is a historical sociology of money relationships” (1984:58). This difference in their analyses is related to a crucial political difference between Simmel and Marx. Because Marx saw economic problems as time-bound, the product of capitalist society, he believed that eventually they could be solved. Simmel, however, saw the basic problems as inherent in human life and held out no hope for future improvement. In fact, Simmel believed that socialism, instead of improving the situation, would heighten the kinds of problems discussed in *The Philosophy of Money*. *The Philosophy of Money* begins with a discussion of the general forms of money and value. Later the discussion moves to the impact of money on the “inner world” of actors and on culture in general. Because the argument is so complex, we can only highlight it here.

**Money and Value**

One of Simmel's initial concerns in the work, as we discussed briefly earlier, is the relationship between money and value (Kamolnick, 2001). In general, he argued that people create value by making objects, separating themselves from those objects, and then seeking to overcome the “distance, obstacles, difficulties”
The greater the difficulty is of obtaining an object, the greater its value will be. However, difficulty of attainment has a "lower and an upper limit" (Simmel, 1907/1978:72). The general principle is that the value of things comes from the ability of people to distance themselves properly from objects. Things that are too close, too easily obtained, are not very valuable. Some exertion is needed for something to be considered valuable. Conversely, things that are too far, too difficult, or nearly impossible to obtain are also not very valuable. Things that defy most, if not all, of our efforts to obtain them cease to be valuable to us. Those things that are most valuable are neither too distant nor too close. Among the factors involved in the distance of an object from an actor are the time it takes to obtain it, its scarcity, the difficulties involved in acquiring it, and the need to give up other things in order to acquire it. People try to place themselves at a proper distance from objects, which must be attainable, but not too easily.

In this general context of value, Simmel discussed money. In the economic realm, money serves both to create distance from objects and to provide the means to overcome it. The money value attached to objects in a modern economy places them at a distance from us; we cannot obtain them without money of our own. The difficulty in obtaining the money and therefore the objects makes them valuable to us. At the same time, once we obtain enough money, we are able to overcome the distance between ourselves and the objects. Money thus performs the interesting function of creating distance between people and objects and then providing the means to overcome that distance.

**Money, Reification, and Rationalization**

In the process of creating value, money also provides the basis for the development of the market, the modern economy, and ultimately modern (capitalistic) society (Poggi, 1996). Money provides the means by which these entities acquire a life of their own that is external to, and coercive of, the actor. This stands in contrast to earlier societies in which barter or trade could not lead to the reified world that is the distinctive product of a money economy. Money permits this development in various ways. For example, Simmel argued that money allows for “long-range calculations, large-scale enterprises and long-term credits” (1907/1978:125). Later, Simmel said that “money has … developed … the most objective practices, the most logical, purely mathematical norms, the absolute freedom from everything personal” (1907/1978:128). He saw this process of reification as only part of the more general process by which the mind embodies and symbolizes itself in objects. These embodiments, these symbolic structures, become reified and come to exert a controlling force on actors.

Not only does money help create a reified social world, it also contributes to the increasing rationalization of that social world (Deutschmann, 1996; B. Turner, 1986). This is another of the concerns that Simmel shared with Weber (D. Levine, 2000). A money economy fosters an emphasis on quantitative rather than qualitative factors.

It would be easy to multiply the examples that illustrate the growing preponderance of the category of quantity over that of quality, or more precisely the tendency to dissolve quality into quantity, to remove the elements more and more from quality, to grant them only specific forms of motion and to interpret
everything that is specifically, individually, and qualitatively determined as the more or less, the bigger or smaller, the wider or narrower, the more or less frequent of those colourless elements and awarenesses that are only accessible to numerical determination—even though this tendency may never absolutely attain its goal by mortal means.

Thus, one of the major tendencies of life—the reduction of quality to quantity—achieves its highest and uniquely perfect representation in money. Here, too, money is the pinnacle of a cultural historical series of developments which unambiguously determines its direction.

(Simmel, 1907/1978:278–280)

Less obviously, money contributes to rationalization by increasing the importance of intellectuality in the modern world (Deutschmann, 1996; B. Turner, 1986). On the one hand, the development of a money economy presupposes a significant expansion of mental processes. As an example, Simmel pointed to the complicated mental processes that are required by such money transactions as covering bank notes with cash reserves. On the other hand, a money economy contributes to a considerable change in the norms and values of society; it aids in the “fundamental reorientation of culture towards intellectuality” (Simmel, 1907/1978:152). In part because of a money economy, intellect has come to be considered the most valuable of our mental energies.

Simmel saw the significance of the individual declining as money transactions become an increasingly important part of society and as reified structures expand. This is part of his general argument on the decline of individual subjective culture in the face of the expansion of objective culture (the “tragedy of culture”):

The rapid circulation of money induces habits of spending and acquisition; it makes a specific quantity of money psychologically less significant and valuable, while money in general becomes increasingly important because money matters now affect the individual more vitally than they do in a less agitated style of life. We are confronted here with a very common phenomenon; namely, that the total value of something increases to the same extent as the value of its individual parts declines. For example, the size and significance of a social group often becomes greater the less highly the lives and interests of its individual members are valued; the objective culture, the diversity and liveliness of its content attain their highest point through a division of labour that often condemns the individual representative and participant in this culture to a monotonous specialization, narrowness, and stunted growth. The whole becomes more perfect and harmonious, the less the individual is a harmonious being.

(Simmel, 1907/1978:199)

Jorge Arditi (1996) has put this issue in slightly different terms. Arditi recognizes the theme of increasing rationalization in Simmel’s work but argues that it must be seen in the context of Simmel’s thinking on the nonrational. “According to Simmel, the nonrational is a primary, essential element of ‘life,’ an integral aspect of our humanity. Its gradual eclipse in the expanses of a modern, highly rationalized world implies, then, an
unquestionable impoverishment of being” (Arditi, 1996:95). One example of the nonrational is love (others are emotions and faith), and it is nonrational because, among other things, it is impractical, is the opposite of intellectual experience, does not necessarily have real value, is impulsive, nothing social or cultural intervenes between lover and beloved, and it springs “from the completely nonrational depths of life” (Simmel, in Arditi, 1996:96). With increasing rationalization, we begin to lose the nonrational and with it “we lose … the most meaningful of our human attributes: our authenticity” (Arditi, 1996:103). This loss of authenticity, of the nonrational, is a real human tragedy.

In some senses, it may be difficult to see how money can take on the central role that it does in modern society. On the surface, it appears that money is simply a means to a variety of ends or, in Simmel’s worlds, “the purest form of the tool” (1907/1978:210). However, money has come to be the most extreme example of a means that has become an end in itself:

Never has an object that owes its value exclusively to its quality as a means, to its convertibility into more definite values, so thoroughly and unreservedly developed into a psychological value absolute, into a completely engrossing final purpose governing our practical consciousness. This ultimate craving for money must increase to the extent that money takes on the quality of a pure means. For this implies that the range of objects made available to money grows continuously, that things submit more and more defencelessly to the power of money, that money itself becomes more and more lacking in quality yet thereby at the same time becomes powerful in relation to the quality of things.

(Simmel, 1907/1978:232)

Negative Effects

A society in which money becomes an end in itself, indeed the ultimate end, has a number of negative effects on individuals (Beilharz, 1996), two of the most interesting of which are the increase in cynicism and the increase in a blasé attitude. Cynicism is induced when both the highest and the lowest aspects of social life are for sale, reduced to a common denominator—money. Thus we can “buy” beauty or truth or intelligence almost as easily as we can buy cornflakes or underarm deodorant. This leveling of everything to a common denominator leads to the cynical attitude that everything has its price, that anything can be bought or sold in the market. A money economy also induces a blasé attitude, “all things as being of an equally dull and grey hue, as not worth getting excited about” (Simmel, 1907/1978:256). The blasé person has lost completely the ability to make value differentiations among the ultimate objects of purchase. Put slightly differently, money is the absolute enemy of aesthetics, reducing everything to formlessness, to purely quantitative phenomena.

Another negative effect of a money economy is the increasingly impersonal relations among people. Instead of dealing with individuals with their own personalities, we are increasingly likely to deal solely with positions—the delivery person, the baker, and so forth—regardless of who occupies those positions. In the modern division of labor characteristic of a money economy, we have the paradoxical situation that while we grow more dependent on other positions for our survival, we know less about the people who occupy those
positions. The specific individual who fills a given position becomes progressively insignificant. Personalities
tend to disappear behind positions that demand only a small part of them. Because so little is demanded of
them, many individuals can fill the same position equally well. People thus become interchangeable parts.

A related issue is the impact of the money economy on individual freedom. A money economy leads to an
increase in individual enslavement. The individual in the modern world becomes atomized and isolated. No
longer embedded within a group, the individual stands alone in the face of an ever-expanding and increasingly
coercive objective culture. The individual in the modern world is thus enslaved by a massive objective culture.

Another impact of the money economy is the reduction of all human values to dollar terms, “the tendency to
reduce the value of man to a monetary expression” (Simmel, 1907/1978:356). For example, Simmel offered
the case in primitive society of atonement for a murder by a money payment. But his best example is the
exchange of sex for money. The expansion of prostitution is traceable in part to the growth of the money
economy.

Some of Simmel’s most interesting insights lie in his thoughts on the impact of money on people’s styles of
life. For example, a society dominated by a money economy tends to reduce everything to a string of causal
connections that can be comprehended intellectually, not emotionally. Related to this is what Simmel called
the “calculating character” of life in the modern world. The specific form of intellectuality that is peculiarly
suited to a money economy is a mathematical mode of thinking. This, in turn, is related to the tendency to
emphasize quantitative rather than qualitative factors in the social world. Simmel concluded that “the lives of
many people are absorbed by such evaluating, weighing, calculating, and reducing of qualitative values to
quantitative ones” (1907/1978:444).

The key to Simmel’s discussion of money’s impact on style of life is in the growth of objective culture at the
expense of individual culture. The gap between the two grows larger at an accelerating rate:

This discrepancy seems to widen steadily. Every day and from all sides, the wealth of objective culture
increases, but the individual mind can enrich the forms and contents of its own development only by
distancing itself still further from that culture and developing its own at a much slower pace.

(Simmel, 1907/1978:449)

**Tragedy of Culture**

The major cause of this increasing disparity between objective culture and individual culture is the increasing
division of labor in modern society (G. Oakes, 1984:19). Increased specialization leads to an improved ability
to create the various components of the cultural world. But at the same time, the highly specialized individual
loses a sense of the total culture and loses the ability to control it. As objective culture grows, individual
culture atrophies. One of the examples of this is that language in its totality has clearly expanded enormously,
yet the linguistic abilities of given individuals seem to be declining. Similarly, with the growth of technology
and machinery, the abilities of the individual worker and the skills required have declined dramatically.
Finally, although there has been an enormous expansion of the intellectual sphere, fewer and fewer individuals seem to deserve the label “intellectual.” Highly specialized individuals are confronted with an increasingly closed and interconnected world of products over which they have little or no control. A mechanical world devoid of spirituality comes to dominate individuals, and their lifestyles are affected in various ways. Acts of production come to be meaningless exercises in which individuals do not see their roles in the overall process or in the production of the final product. Relationships among people are highly specialized and impersonal. Consumption becomes little more than the devouring of one meaningless product after another.

The massive expansion of objective culture has had a dramatic effect upon the rhythm of life. In general, the unevenness that was characteristic of earlier epochs has been leveled and replaced in modern society by a much more consistent pattern of living. Examples of this leveling of modern culture abound.

In times past, food consumption was cyclical and often very uncertain. What foods were consumed and when they were available depended on the harvest. Today, with improved methods of preservation and transportation, we can consume virtually any food at any time. Furthermore, the ability to preserve and store huge quantities of food has helped offset disruptions caused by bad harvests, natural catastrophes, and so forth.

In communication the infrequent and unpredictable mail coach has been replaced by the telegraph, telephone, daily mail service, fax machines, cell phones, e-mail, and social media such as Skype, FaceTime, Facebook, and Twitter which make communication available at all times.

In an earlier time, night and day gave life a natural rhythm. Now, with artificial lighting, the natural rhythm has been altered greatly. Many activities formerly restricted to daylight hours can now be performed at night as well.

Intellectual stimulation, which formerly was restricted to an occasional conversation or a rare book, is now available at all times because of the ready availability of books and magazines. In this realm, as in all the others, the situation has grown even more pronounced since Simmel’s time. With radio, television, DVD players and recorders, home computers, media-streaming services, and e-books the availability and possibilities of intellectual stimulation have grown far beyond anything Simmel could have imagined.

There are positive elements to all this, of course. For example, people have much more freedom because they are less restricted by the natural rhythm of life. In spite of the human gains, problems arise because all these developments are at the level of objective culture and are integral parts of the process by which objective culture grows and further impoverishes individual culture.

In the end, money has come to be the symbol of, and a major factor in, the development of a relativistic mode of existence. Money allows us to reduce the most disparate phenomena to numbers of dollars, and this allows them to be compared to each other. In other words, money allows us to relativize everything. Our relativistic way of life stands in contrast to earlier methods of living in which people believed in a number of eternal verities. A money economy destroys such eternal truths. The gains to people in terms of increased freedom from absolute ideas are far outweighed by the costs. The alienation endemic to the expanding objective culture

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of a modern money economy is a far greater threat to people, in Simmel's eyes, than the evils of absolutism. Perhaps Simmel would not wish us to return to an earlier, simpler time, but he certainly would warn us to be weary of the seductive dangers associated with the growth of a money economy and objective culture in the modern world.

Although we have focused most of our attention on the negative effects of the modern money economy, such an economy also has its liberating aspects (Beilharz, 1996; D. Levine, 1981b, 1991b; Poggi, 1993). First, it allows us to deal with many more people in a much-expanded marketplace. Second, our obligations to one another are highly limited (to specific services or products) rather than all-encompassing. Third, the money economy allows people to find gratifications that were unavailable in earlier economic systems. Fourth, people have greater freedom in such an environment to develop their individuality to a fuller extent. Fifth, people are better able to maintain and protect their subjective center, because they are involved only in very limited relationships. Sixth, the separation of the worker from the means of production, as Simmel pointed out, allows the individual some freedom from those productive forces. Finally, money helps people grow increasingly free of the constraints of their social groups. For example, in a barter economy people are largely controlled by their groups, but in the modern economic world such constraints are loosened, with the result that people are freer to make their own economic deals. However, although Simmel was careful to point out a variety of liberating effects of the money economy, and of modernity in general, in our view the heart of his work lies in his discussion of the problems associated with modernity, especially the “tragedy of culture.”
Secrecy: A Case Study in Simmel’s Sociology

Although *The Philosophy of Money* demonstrates that Simmel’s work has a theoretical scope that rivals that of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, it remains an atypical example of his work. Thus, in this closing section we return to a more characteristic type of Simmelian scholarship, his work on a specific form of interaction—secrecy. Secrecy is defined as the condition in which one person has the intention of hiding something while the other person is seeking to reveal that which is being hidden. In this discussion, we are interested not only in outlining Simmel’s many insightful ideas on secrecy but also in bringing together under one heading many of the sociological ideas raised throughout this chapter.

Simmel began with the basic fact that people must know some things about other people in order to interact with them. For instance, we must know with whom we are dealing (e.g., a friend, a relative, a shopkeeper). We may come to know a great deal about other people, but we can never know them absolutely. That is, we can never know all the thoughts, moods, and so on, of other people. However, we do form some sort of unitary conception of other people out of the bits and pieces that we know about them; we form a fairly coherent mental picture of the people with whom we interact. Simmel saw a dialectical relationship between interaction (being) and the mental picture we have of others (conceiving): “Our relationships thus develop upon the basis of reciprocal knowledge, and this knowledge upon the basis of actual relations. Both are inextricably interwoven” (1906/1950:309).

In all aspects of our lives we acquire not only truth but also ignorance and error. However, it is in the interaction with other people that ignorance and error acquire a distinctive character. This relates to the inner lives of the people with whom we interact. People, in contrast to any other object of knowledge, have the capacity to intentionally reveal the truth about themselves or to lie and conceal such information.

The fact is that even if people wanted to reveal all (and they almost always do not), they could not do so because so much information “would drive everybody into the insane asylum” (Simmel, 1906/1950:312). Thus, people must select the things that they report to others. From the point of view of Simmel’s concern with quantitative issues, we report only “fragments” of our inner lives to others. Furthermore, we choose which fragments to reveal and which to conceal. Thus, in all interaction, we reveal only a part of ourselves, and which part we opt to show depends on how we select and arrange the fragments we choose to reveal.

This brings us to the lie, a form of interaction in which the liar intentionally hides the truth from others. In the lie, it is not just that others are left with an erroneous conception but also that the error is traceable to the fact that the liar intended that the others be deceived.

Simmel discussed the lie in terms of social geometry, specifically his ideas on distance. For example, in Simmel’s view, we can better accept and come to terms with the lies of those who are distant from us. Thus, we have little difficulty learning that the politicians who habituate Washington, D.C., frequently lie to us. In contrast, “if the persons closest to us lie, life becomes unbearable” (Simmel, 1906/1950:313). The lie of a spouse, lover, or child has a far more devastating impact on us than does the lie of a government official whom...
we know only through the television screen.

More generally, in terms of distance, all everyday communication combines elements known to both parties with facts known to only one or the other. It is the existence of the latter that leads to “distanceness” in all social relationships. Indeed, Simmel argued that social relationships require both elements that are known to the interactants and elements that are unknown to one party or the other. In other words, even the most intimate relationships require both nearness and distance, reciprocal knowledge and mutual concealment. Thus, secrecy is an integral part of all social relationships, although a relationship may be destroyed if the secret becomes known to the person from whom it was being kept.

Secrecy is linked to the size of society. In small groups, it is difficult to develop secrets because “everybody is too close to everybody else and his circumstances, and frequency and intimacy of contact involve too many temptations to revelation” (Simmel, 1906/1950:335). Furthermore, in small groups, secrets are not even needed because everyone is much like everyone else. In large groups, in contrast, secrets can more easily develop and are much more needed because there are important differences among people.

On the issue of size, at the most macroscopic level, we should note that secrecy not only is a form of interaction (which, as we have seen, affects many other forms) but also can come to characterize a group in its entirety. Unlike the secret possessed by a single individual, the secret in a secret society is shared by all the members and determines the reciprocal relations among them. As with the individual case, however, the secret of the secret society cannot be hidden forever. In such a society there is a constant tension caused by the fact that the secret can be uncovered, or revealed, and thus the entire basis for the existence of the secret society can be eliminated.

Secrecy and Social Relationships

Simmel examined various forms of social relationships from the point of view of reciprocal knowledge and secrecy. For example, we all are involved in a range of interest groups in which we interact with other people on a very limited basis, and the total personalities of these people are irrelevant to our specific concerns. Thus, in the university the student is concerned with what the professor says and does in the classroom and not in all aspects of the professor’s life and personality. Linking this to his ideas on the larger society, Simmel argued that the increasing objectification of culture brings with it more and more limited-interest groups and the kinds of relationships associated with them. Such relationships require less and less of the subjective totality of the individual (individual culture) than did associations in premodern societies.

In the impersonal relationships characteristic of modern objectified society, confidence, as a form of interaction, becomes increasingly important. To Simmel “confidence is intermediate between knowledge and ignorance about a man” (1906/1950:318). In premodern societies people were much more likely to know a great deal about the people they dealt with. But in the modern world we do not, and cannot, have a great deal of knowledge about most of the people with whom we have associations. Thus, students do not know a great deal about their professors (and vice versa), but they must have the confidence that their professors will show up at the appointed times and talk about what they are supposed to discuss.
Another form of social relationship is *acquaintanceship*. We know our acquaintances, but we do not have intimate knowledge of them: “One knows of the other only what he is toward the outside, either in the purely social-representative sense, or in the sense of that which he shows us” (Simmel, 1906/1950:320). Thus, there is far more secretiveness among acquaintances than there is among intimates.

Under the heading of “acquaintanceship,” Simmel discussed another form of association—*discretion*. We are discrete with our acquaintances, staying “away from the knowledge of all the other does not expressly reveal to us. It does not refer to anything particular which we are not permitted to know, but to a quite general reserve in regard to the total personality” (Simmel, 1906/1950:321). In spite of being discrete, we often come to know more about other people than they reveal to us voluntarily. More specifically, we often come to learn things that others would prefer we do not know. Simmel offered a very Freudian example of how we learn such things: “To the man with the psychologically fine ear, people innumerable times betray their most secret thoughts and qualities, not only although, but often because, they anxiously try to guard them” (1906/1950:323–324). In fact, Simmel argued that human interaction is dependent on both discretion and the fact that we often come to know more than we are supposed to know.

Turning to another form of association, *friendship*, Simmel contradicts the assumption that friendship is based on total intimacy, full reciprocal knowledge. This lack of full intimacy is especially true of friendships in modern, differentiated society: “Modern man, possibly, has too much to hide to sustain a friendship in the ancient sense” (Simmel, 1906/1950:326). Thus, we have a series of differentiated friendships based on such things as common intellectual pursuits, religion, and shared experiences. There is a very limited kind of intimacy in such friendships and thus a good deal of secrecy. However, in spite of these limitations, friendship still involves some intimacy:

But the relation which is thus restricted and surrounded by discretions, may yet stem from the center of the total personality. It may yet be reached by the sap of the ultimate roots of the personality, even though it feeds only part of the person's periphery. In its idea, it involves the same affective depth and the same readiness for sacrifice, which less differentiated epochs and persons connect only with a common *total* sphere of life, for which reservations and discretion constitute no problem.

(Simmel, 1906/1950:326)

Then there is what is usually thought of as the most intimate, least secret form of association—*marriage*. Simmel argued that there is a temptation in marriage to reveal all to the partner, to have no secrets. However, in his view, this would be a mistake. For one thing, all social relationships require “a certain proportion of truth and error,” and thus it would be impossible to remove all error from a social relationship (Simmel, 1906/1950:329). More specifically, complete self-revelation (assuming such a thing is even possible) would make a marriage matter-of-fact and remove all possibility of the unexpected. Finally, most of us have limited internal resources, and every revelation reduces the (secret) treasures that we have to offer to others. Only those few with a great storehouse of personal accomplishments can afford numerous revelations to a marriage partner. All others are left denuded (and uninteresting) by excessive self-revelation.
Other Thoughts on Secrecy

Next, Simmel turned to an analysis of the functions, the positive consequences, of secrecy. Simmel saw the secret as “one of man’s greatest achievements … the secret produces an immense enlargement of life: numerous contents of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity. The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world” (1906/1950:330). More specifically in terms of its functionality, the secret, especially if it is shared by a number of people, makes for a strong “we feeling” among those who know the secret. High status is also associated with the secret; there is something mysterious about superordinate positions and superior achievements.

Human interaction in general is shaped by secrecy and its logical opposite, betrayal. The secret is always accompanied dialectically by the possibility that it can be discovered. Betrayal can come from two sources. Externally, another person can discover our secret, whereas internally there is always the possibility that we will reveal our secret to others. “The secret puts a barrier between men but, at the same time, it creates the tempting challenge to break through it, by gossip or confession…. Out of the counterplay of these two interests, in concealing and revealing, spring nuances and fates of human interaction that permeate it in its entirety” (Simmel, 1906/1950:334).

Simmel linked his ideas on the lie to his views on the larger society of the modern world. To Simmel, the modern world is much more dependent on honesty than earlier societies were. For one thing, the modern economy is increasingly a credit economy, and credit is dependent on the fact that people will repay what they promise. For another, in modern science, researchers are dependent on the results of many other studies that they cannot examine in minute detail. Those studies are produced by innumerable other scientists whom the researchers are unlikely to know personally. Thus, the modern scientist is dependent on the honesty of all other scientists. Simmel concluded, “Under modern conditions, the lie, therefore, becomes something much more devastating than it was earlier, something which questions the very foundations of our life” (1906/1950:313).

More generally, Simmel connected secrecy to his thoughts on the social structure of modern society. On the one hand, a highly differentiated society permits and requires a high degree of secrecy. On the other hand, and dialectically, the secret serves to intensify such differentiation.

Simmel associated the secret with the modern money economy; money makes possible a level of secrecy that was unattainable previously. First, money’s “compressibility” makes it possible to make others rich by simply slipping them checks without anyone else noticing the act. Second, the abstractness and the qualityless character of money make it possible to hide “transactions, acquisitions, and changes in ownership” that could not be hidden if more tangible objects were exchanged (Simmel, 1906/1950:335). Third, money can be invested in very distant things, thereby making the transaction invisible to those in the immediate environment.

Simmel also saw that in the modern world, public matters, such as those relating to politics, have tended to lose their secrecy and inaccessibility. In contrast, private affairs are much more secret than they were in
premodern societies. Here Simmel tied his thoughts on secrecy to those on the modern city by arguing that "modern life has developed, in the midst of metropolitan crowdedness, a technique for making and keeping private matters secret" (Simmel, 1906/1950:337). Overall, “what is public becomes even more public, and what is private becomes even more private” (337).

Thus, Simmel's work on secrecy illustrates many aspects of his theoretical orientation.
Criticisms

We have already discussed some criticisms of Simmel’s particular ideas, for example that his emphasis on forms imposes order where none exists and that he seems to contradict himself by viewing social structures, on the one hand, as simply a form of interaction and, on the other hand, as coercive and independent of interactions. In addition, we have described the difference between Marx and Simmel on alienation, which suggests the primary Marxist criticism of Simmel. This criticism is that Simmel did not suggest a way out of the tragedy of culture, because he considered alienation to be inherent to the human condition. For Simmel, the disjuncture between objective and subjective culture was as much a part of our “species being” as labor was to Marx. Therefore, whereas Marx believed that alienation would be swept away with the coming of socialism, Simmel had no such political hope.

Undoubtedly, the most frequently cited criticism of Simmel is the fragmentary nature of his work. Simmel is accused of having no coherent theoretical approach, but instead a set of fragmentary or “impressionistic” (Frisby, 1981) approaches. It certainly is true, as we have argued here, that Simmel focused on forms and types of association, but that is hardly the sort of theoretical unity that we see in the other founders of sociology. Indeed, one of Simmel’s most enthusiastic supporters in American sociology, Levine and colleagues (1976a:814) admitted that, “although literate American sociologists today could be expected to produce a coherent statement of the theoretical frameworks and principal themes of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, few would be able to do the same for Simmel.” At times even Simmel seemed to agree with this characterization, recognizing himself not as someone who has developed a coherent school of thought, but a set of stimulating ideas:

I know that I shall die without spiritual heirs (and that is good). The estate I leave is like cash distributed among many heirs, each of whom puts his share to use in some trade that is compatible with his nature but which can no longer be recognized as coming from that estate.

(Simmel, cited in Frisby, 1984:150)

Consequently, Simmel has often been regarded as a natural resource of insights to be mined for empirical hypothesis rather than as a coherent framework for theoretical analysis.

This said, recent Simmel scholarship suggests a more unified approach than previously imagined. In their introduction to the English translation of View of Life, Levine and Silver (2011) questioned the “postmodernists and critical theorists intent on preserving Simmel’s image as an impressionistic, unsystematic essayist” and argued instead that Simmel’s life philosophy may provide the key to a unified account of Simmel’s work. The characterization of Simmel as fragmented and unsystematic may have more to do with the way in which Simmel has been received in America than it has to do with his own theoretical vision. Emphasizing the unity of his thought, Pyyhtinen (2010) argued that Simmel offers a process sociology. Drawing out the theme of life as it manifests across Simmel’s oeuvre, Pyyhtinen showed that Simmel anticipates many
contemporary ideas such as “affect” and “emergence.” These are not one-off Simmelian impressions, but core to the whole of his thought. This characterization not only treats Simmel as a thinker in lifelong pursuit of specific problems and themes, but one who offers a sociology quite distinct from Marx, Durkheim, or Weber. Schermer and Jary (2013) also argued that Simmel’s sociology is unified and systematic. Rather than focus on the theme of life, they focused on Simmel’s dialectical method. They argued that Simmel’s reliance on a relational view of human interaction and the ongoing application of the dialectic actually allowed him to systematize an otherwise disorderly (i.e., unsystematic) social world.
Contemporary Applications

Whether he is characterized as a fragmented or systematic thinker, Simmel's ideas have been applied to understand numerous contemporary social problems. As noted at the outset of this chapter, the Chicago school picked up on Simmel for his insights into microsociology. While Simmel's micro-focused “interactionism” remains relevant, contemporary sociology has made use of him in other ways. Simmel's writing on culture, especially art (Simmel 1916/2005) and religion (Silver and O'Neill, 2014; Simmel, 1997), have made Simmel popular with cultural sociologists. In fact it was Simmel's emphasis on culture combined with his presumed impressionistic and fragmentary writing style that made him popular among postmodern sociologists in the 1980s and 1990s (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993). Sociologists studying space and the city regularly refer to Simmel's essay on the metropolis and mental life, and also draw upon Simmel's lesser known essays on the features of physical space (e.g., the doorway, the bridge) and their meanings for human interaction (Scaff, 2009).

More specifically, Simmel's work has been applied to twenty-first-century social phenomena such as the impact of digital technologies on privacy, secrecy, and personal identity (G. Marx and Muschert, 2009). Secrecy, as discussed earlier, involves “efforts to manage information, whether withholding or revealing” (G. Marx and Muschert, 2009:221). Contemporary technologies introduce new ways in which information can be withheld and revealed. Internet forums allow people to share personal information and opinions with strangers who they are likely to never meet in person. E-mail encryption allows people to control access to sensitive information. Gary Marx and Glen Muschert (2009:226) asked, “What if Simmel made a visit to a contemporary supermarket and was greeted with his own image on a video monitor, heard advertising on a loudspeaker, provided a discount card to the checkout clerk, and received personalized (or at least ‘profilized’) messages on the sales receipt promising future discounts?” Secrecy is no longer solely a matter of managing facts about oneself in face-to-face relations, but requires knowledge of the information systems that populate everyday life: privacy settings on Facebook, risks of identity theft, and government use of biometric surveillance technologies. How does a person maintain a distinction between the private and the public in this kind of social environment? How does one maintain secrecy when surrounded by technologies that are constantly appropriating personal information without one's knowledge? Although Simmel's initial formulation remains relevant, the problems of secrecy and self-revelation are elevated to levels Simmel could not have anticipated.

Recent scholarship has also applied Simmel's theories to understand the contemporary problem of globalization. Among other features, globalization involves the accelerated movement of people across international borders through immigration, temporary work, and tourism. Simmel's famous essay on the “stranger” can help us to think about the kinds of social relationships that emerge out of these global processes. For example, drawing on a distinction made by Agnes Heller, sociologist John Rundell (2014) distinguished between conditional strangers and contingent strangers. Conditional strangers have homes to which they can return. They include people such as migrant workers, soldiers, and tourists. Contingent strangers, like refugees, no longer have a home to which they can return. Another concept important to the
study of globalization is *cosmopolitanism*. A cosmopolitan is the kind of person who sees himself or herself as a citizen of the world. A cosmopolitan is comfortable in societies (more specifically, city spaces) characterized by flux, flow, and social diversity. Simmel not only described life in complex, cosmopolitan cities (1903/1971) but also advocated for a cosmopolitan, or as Vittorio Cotesta (2009) said, “global” ideal for humanity. Here the cosmopolitan ideal is one in which we recognize that the common feature shared by all humans is their unique individuality. It is true that contemporary processes of globalization frequently stifle individuality (Ritzer, 2004) and that the perception of difference often leads to racism and other forms of violence rather than mutual appreciation. Nevertheless, Cotesta argued, Simmel’s work can provide a starting point for thinking through the kinds of social conditions necessary for the construction of a creative, flourishing “global humanity.”
Summary

The work of Georg Simmel has been influential in American sociological theory for many years. The focus of this influence seems to be shifting from microsociology to a general sociological theory and even the idea that Simmel's work contains within it a unified theoretical approach. Simmel's microsociology is embedded in a broad dialectical theory that interrelates the cultural and individual levels. We identify four basic levels of concern in Simmel's work: psychological, interactional, structural and institutional, and the ultimate metaphysics of life.

Simmel operated with a dialectical orientation and we illustrate Simmel's dialectical concerns in various ways. We deal with the way they are manifested in forms of interaction—specifically, fashion. Simmel also was interested in the conflicts between the individual and social structures, but his greatest concern was those conflicts that develop between individual culture and objective culture. Simmel grounded his philosophy and sociology in a theory of life as flux and flow. Life, too, is a dialectical process in which life interacts with form. Simmel identified a historical trajectory in which life grows beyond itself—more-life becomes more-than-life, or, as he put it elsewhere, subjective culture is increasingly dominated by objective culture. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to Simmel's thoughts on each of the four levels of social reality. Although he did not write extensively about individual consciousness, he made many useful assumptions about it. He also valued individuality as an ethical and moral ideal because it allowed individuals the full exercise of their creative capacities. He had much more to offer on forms of interaction and types of interactants. In this formal sociology, we see Simmel's great interest in social geometry, for example, numbers of people. In this context, we examine Simmel's work on the crucial transition from a dyad to a triad. With the addition of one person, we move from a dyad to a triad and with it the possibility of the development of large-scale structures that can become separate from, and dominant over, individuals. This creates the possibility of conflict and contradiction between the individual and the larger society. In his social geometry, Simmel was also concerned with the issue of distance, as in, for example, his essay on the “stranger,” including “strangeness” in social life. Simmel's interest in social types is illustrated in a discussion of the poor, and his thoughts on social forms are illustrated in a discussion of domination, that is, superordination and subordination.

At the macro level, Simmel had comparatively little to say about social structures, although the concept of world allowed Simmel to describe particularly influential, over-arching worldviews such as religion, art, and science. Simmel believed some worldviews and their attendant institutions are more harmful than others, for example, the money economy. Simmel was particularly interested in what he called objective culture. He was interested in both the expansion of this culture and its destructive effects on individuals (the “tragedy of culture”). This general concern is manifest in a variety of his specific essays, for example, those on the city and exchange.

In The Philosophy of Money Simmel's discussion progressed from money to value to the problems of modern society and, ultimately, to the problems of life in general. Of particular concern is Simmel's interest in the tragedy of culture as part of a broader set of apprehensions about culture. Finally, we discuss Simmel's work on secrecy in order to illustrate the full range of his theoretical ideas. The discussion of Simmel's work on
money, as well as his ideas on secrecy, demonstrates that he has a far more elegant and sophisticated theoretical orientation than he is usually given credit for by those who are familiar with only his thoughts on micro-level phenomena.
Notes

1. In the specific case of interaction, contents are the “drives, purposes and ideas which lead people to associate with one another” (D. Levine, 1981b:65).

2. Pyyhtinen (2010) argued that American sociology has focused on the testable elements of Simmel’s writings and thus has tended to emphasize his microsociology. This has given rise to an image of Simmel’s work as fragmented and inconsistent. In contrast, the German tradition has tended to interpret Simmel in the context of the philosophical writings of his time and thus portray him as a scholar concerned with broader metaphysical problems. This is not merely a distinction between Simmel the sociologist and Simmel the philosopher but rather a comment on the scope and systematicity of Simmel’s work.
10 Early Women Sociologists and Classical Sociological Theory: 1830–1930

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Chapter Outline

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876)
Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)
Jane Addams (1860–1935) and the Chicago Women’s School
Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) and Ida Wells-Barnett (1862–1931)
Marianne Schnitger Weber (1870–1954)
Beatrice Potter Webb (1858–1943)

The traditional telling of the history of sociological theory has been shaped by a politics of gender that tends to emphasize male achievement and erase female contributions. (For an account of how this erasure occurred, see Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1998/2007.) As conventionally told, the creation of sociological theory is presented as the work of two generations of men: a “founding” generation who, in the middle third of the nineteenth century, acted as public educators outside any formal university base—particularly, Comte, Spencer, and Marx—and a second “classical” generation, a larger cohort of university-based men—notably, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Mead, and Park—who between 1890 and 1930 set out to establish a profession and a discipline. This historical account raises the critical question of mobilized feminism—“And what about the women?”

This chapter modifies this conventional history in the following ways. First, we add one woman, Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), to the first mid-nineteenth-century generation of sociology’s founders, affirming that Martineau is not only a key theorist of this generation but that she is perhaps sociology’s original founder. Second, we describe a larger, interconnected community of women on both sides of the Atlantic who, in the period of sociology’s emergence (1890–1930), worked with extraordinary energy to create their own models for sociological theory and practice. We review the ideas of just a few of these women—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells-Barnett, Marianne Weber, and Beatrice Potter Webb. The women who contributed are so numerous and the records so incomplete that we have had to be very selective in our presentation; important women omitted here include Helen Campbell, Caroline Bartlett Crane, Katharine Bement Davis, Jenny P. d’Héricourt, Crystal Eastman, Isabel Eaton, Lucille Eaves, Emma Goldman, Rosa Luxemburg, Florence Nightingale, Olive Schreiner, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, Anna Garlin Spencer, Jessie Taft, Flora Tristan, Mary van Kleeck, and Fannie Barrier Williams.

The retelling here, part of the only half-completed feminist revolution in sociology (Alway, 1995; Chafetz, 1997; Delamont, 2003; Stacey and Thorne, 1985, 1996; Thistle, 2000), is important because a discipline is significantly defined by the canon of its classic works. That canon changes over time, depending in part on whether the discipline is engaged in the practice of “normal” or “revolutionary” science (Kuhn, 1970). In moments of revolutionary science, the discipline of sociology has frequently reached out to incorporate new or forgotten figures (e.g., Parsons’s reintroduction of Weber in the 1930s and the collective effort to incorporate Marx in the 1960s). This reclamation is currently under way in the burgeoning of feminist-inspired research of the past three decades (Arni and Mueller, 2004; Broschart, 1991a, 1991b; P. Collins, 1990; Costin, 1983;

In making our selection, we have been guided by Dorothy E. Smith’s conception that “a sociology is a systematically developed consciousness of society and of social relations” (1987:2). By “systematically developed consciousness,” we mean that the person doing the thinking is doing so with a view to understanding society, and that understanding finds expression in an ability to identify and relate the parts that constitute society and social relations. The parts that seem essential to any social theory are some sense of (1) the fundamental organization of society, (2) the nature of the human being, (3) the relation between ideas and materiality, (4) the purpose and methods appropriate to social-science study, and (5) a definition of the social role of the sociologist. The women whose theories we describe developed such an understanding, and that understanding is essentially feminist. And this fact adds a sixth point to be looked for in their understanding of society and social relations: their articulation of a principle from which to judge the essential fairness of the society in place.

By describing these theories as feminist, we mean that from the vantage point of contemporary feminist sociological theory, we recognize certain themes and concerns central to the theories of these women. These include (1) the theorist’s awareness of her gender and her stance in that gender identity as she develops her sociological theory, (2) an awareness of the situatedness of her analysis and of the situatedness of the vantage points of others, (3) a consistent focus on the lives and work of women, (4) a critical concern with the practices of social inequality, and (5) a commitment to the practice of sociology in pursuit of social amelioration.
Harriet Martineau (1802–1876)

Harriet Martineau was born on June 12, 1802, in Norwich, England. The sixth of eight children in a business family of comfortable means and of the liberal Unitarian faith, Harriet, as a child, was given as good an education as her brothers. An able student, she turned eagerly to scholarship, not only because of its intrinsic appeal but also as a respite from her childhood shyness and from the deafness that overcame her in early adolescence. She had an extraordinary facility for writing and began publishing in 1820, writing on women’s unequal treatment in education and religion for the Unitarian journal *The Repository*.

The failure of the family business left her penniless in 1829. Faced with the choice of earning her—and her mother’s—living as a seamstress or as a writer, she chose the latter, settling on a plan for writing in which she would educate the public, in a pleasing and acceptable form, in the principles of the emerging discipline of sociology. Between 1832 and 1834, she wrote didactic novels in the series, *Illustrations of Political Economy*. The series was enormously successful, averaging 10,000 copies a month at its height and outselling even Dickens. The success of this venture won her financial independence, fame, and political influence.

In 1834, Martineau followed this enormously successful venture into public education with more theoretical work: she drafted the first text on sociological research techniques, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (which was published in 1838). Between 1834 and 1836, she applied and expanded these research strategies in an extensive field study of American society, published in 1836–1837 in three volumes as *Society in America*—although she had wanted it titled “Theory and Practice of Society in America” to better capture the intent of her social-science project. By 1837, her reputation as Britain’s preeminent social analyst led to a request from her publishers that she “become editor of a proposed new periodical ‘to treat of philosophical principles, abstract and applied, of sociology’” (cited in Hoecker-Drysdale, 1994:70–71). Personal uncertainty and family pressure led Martineau to refuse the offer, but...
she continued her projects of social research and of popularizing sociology. In 1853 she published an extensively edited English translation of Comte’s *Positive Philosophy*, a version he so approved that he substituted it, translated back into French, for his original edition. It is only in this relationship to Comte that, until recently, Martineau’s name survived in the record of sociology's history. But the claim may indeed be made that she is the first sociologist—sociology’s “founding mother.”

Martineau would write for the rest of her life for her living, for social reputation, and for political influence. She published more than seventy volumes in many genres, including adult fiction, children’s stories, poetry, history, religious tracts, autobiography, literary criticism, and social and political analysis. She also wrote more than 1,500 newspaper columns.

Despite this grueling writing schedule, Martineau was not a recluse. She traveled extensively in Britain, the United States, and the Middle East. She spoke and traveled on behalf of innumerable public causes, including women’s rights and the abolition of slavery. A prominent feminist thinker, she led a busy social life and was connected to the significant British intellectuals of her day.

The quality that comes through most strongly as we study her life and writings is her valor in the face of deafness, poor health, financial vulnerability, and the disadvantages of being a woman making her way from modest beginnings on her own in nineteenth-century England. Harriet Martineau was determined to make the best of what life had dealt her, and she did so with enormous discipline, considerable talent, and a capacity for joy in the details of her daily experiences. She died on June 27, 1876, at the home she had earned for herself—The Knoll, Ambleside, in England’s Lake District.

The Social Role of the Sociologist

Martineau’s first venture into this new science was an attempt to popularize “political economy,” an intellectual forerunner both of economics and sociology (a science that is, as both Comte and Spencer later also portray it, about material and moral existence). Between 1832 and 1834 she published twenty-five didactic novels in a series called *Illustrations of Political Economy*, intended to teach the principles of the new science of society to a general middle-class and working-class readership through the medium of stories (often set in some distant or exotic place); Martineau concluded each volume with a summary of the principles of the new science that shaped her plot. Martineau embraced the role of sociologist as public educator. She defined her audience democratically and inclusively—the educated intelligentsia like herself, the political class of Britain, the ordinary working people of both the middle and working classes, women, children (by means of a popular series of children’s stories), her public in America (where since 1837 her popularity had been enormous), feminists and abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic, even—in what must be a sociological first—the disabled—in this case, those who, like her, were deaf (1830/1836).

Despite this project of making sociology popular, Martineau held that the formulation of sociology, its subject matter and its method, should be developed in a disciplined and systematic way:

> In an attempt to develop any science, whether deductive or inductive, the very first step … is to define your subject methodically, to lay down the definition of your terms and instruments, and to ascertain what are the principles upon which the science essentially turns.

(Martineau, cited in Hoecker-Drysdale, 1994:112)

The Organization of Society

Sociology’s subject matter, for Martineau, is *social life in society*—its patterns, causes, consequences, and
problems. Like Comte and Spencer, she chose society, understood as roughly equivalent to a nation state or politico-cultural entity, as the object for sociological investigation, and believed that the life of any society is influenced by general social laws, including the principle of progress, the emergence of science as the most advanced product of human intellectual endeavor, and the significance of population dynamics and the natural environment. But for Martineau, the most important law of social life is that “the great ends of human association” aim above all “to the grand one,—the only general one,— … human happiness” (1838b:12). This is the principle by which she judges the essential fairness of society. She argued that a system of social arrangements is conducive to human happiness to the extent that it allows individuals to realize their basic human nature as autonomous moral and practical agents. The opposite of autonomy is domination, the enforced “submission of one’s will to another” (1838a:411).

Morals and Manners

Sociology’s project is, thus, to assess the extent to which a people develop “morals and manners” that produce or subvert this great end of all social life, human happiness. By “morals,” Martineau meant a society’s collective ideas of prescribed and proscribed behavior; by “manners,” its patterns of action and association. The principle that the aim of human association is human happiness—for Martineau as much a “law of nature” as any of the others, that is, one to which societies should conform if they are to progress—distinguishes her sociology from that of Comte and Spencer, giving her theory of society a critical tone essentially absent from their theories. She shares that critical posture with Marx, although his theory would focus on class injustice and be militant, whereas hers would be woman-centered and reformist.

Martineau’s sociology, unlike that of Comte and Spencer, is interested much less in building a model of an ideal-typical, ahistorical, generalized “social system” or creating an abstract typology of societies in terms of their “stages” of development. Rather, she chose to study the fundamental organization of society in the actual patterns of human relationships and activities, in historically developed societies—England, Ireland, the United States, and those of the Middle East. In the truest sense of the term, she was a qualitative, comparative sociologist. In her analysis, the actions and interactions of a society can be classified as relating to various institutional zones—government, economy, law, education, marriage and family, religion, communication, popular culture, and so on. But social activities can also be constructed less formally, as the fluid relational tissue or texture of social life. Thus, Martineau studied hospitality, travel, colloquialisms, attitudes toward money and toward nature, decorum and entertainment, children’s comportment, norms of housing, relations around sexuality, and so on. The life of each society in its uniqueness from, as well as its similarities to, other societies was her immediate subject of attention.

Anomaly

Together with this descriptive task, Martineau wished to analyze each society in terms of its general economic and moral well-being. She set out to discover the moral principles that the society’s members collectively set up for themselves, their cultural aspirations or “Morals.” The well-being of a society is in part to be assessed in terms of the alignment between moral codes and actual behaviors or manners. Martineau called a misalignment between a society’s morals or ideals and its manners or everyday practices an anomaly. In Society
in America (1836–1837), she identified four anomalies that she believed would eventually disrupt U.S. society—that is, four ways the society’s practices did not meet its stated ideals of ensuring all individuals the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These anomalies are the institution of slavery, the unequal status of women, the pursuit of wealth, and the fear of public opinion. She tried to ascertain a society’s progress or malaise in terms of the degree to which it promoted autonomy or allowed domination; she developed three measures of this progress: (1) the condition of the less powerful—women, racial minorities, prisoners, servants, those in need of charity; (2) cultural attitudes toward authority and autonomy; and (3) the extent to which all people are provided with the necessities for autonomous moral and practical action. In this last measure, Martineau linked ideas and materiality.

Methods

“Things” and Sympathy

This concern with issues of measurement is part of Martineau’s deep interest in methods for research and for sound scientific thinking. In How to Observe Morals and Manners (1838b), she focused more sharply on the research work of the social scientist and developed the first methods text in the history of sociology. She believed everyone capable of instruction in social scientific procedures of observation, and she took as her audience the person in everyday life who in the role of “traveler” wants to make informed observations about society. In How to Observe, Martineau gave instruction in the appropriate attitude of the sociologist toward the research experience, in problems of sampling, and in the identification of social indicators. She also developed the first guidelines for the practice of interpretive sociology. She argued that the sociologist must try to develop a sympathetic understanding as a strategy for discovering the meanings of an activity for the actors—for “actions and habits do not always carry their moral impress visibly to all eyes” (1838b:17). To overcome problems of sampling, the sociologist must look for “things” that represent the collectivity. In a passage that anticipates Durkheim’s much later statement (The Rules of Sociological Method, 1895/1982), she said that one must begin the “inquiry into morals and manners with the study of THINGS’ … facts to be collected from architectural remains, epitaphs, civic registers, national music or any other of the thousand manifestations of the common mind which may be found among every people” (1838b:63). She described strategies for field work, including keeping a diary of one’s views, a journal of one’s observations, a notebook for recording events. This concern with disciplined research is sustained after the American investigation in all of her other sociological investigations. In the detail of her directives and her application of these directives in social research, Martineau was much more advanced methodologically than Comte or Spencer, and she anticipated the work of the next generation of academically based or trained sociologists, both male and female. If Martineau is the founder of a feminist sociology, then that sociology is to be both theoretical and firmly grounded in empirical research.

Feminism

Martineau’s feminist approach to social analysis is evident in Society in America (1836–1837) in her pervasive interest in and investigation of the conditions of women’s lives. She made the relational facts of marriage in
the United States a key index of the moral condition of that society (her conclusions are pessimistic). The enslavement of the African American population is her second key index, and she did not miss the significance of the interplay of gender and race. For Martineau, the domination of women closely paralleled the domination of slaves. Like the slave, the woman was described—even to herself—as being indulged, but “indulgence is given her as a substitute for justice. Her case differs from that of the slave, as the principle, just so far as this; that the indulgence is large and universal, instead of petty and capricious. In both cases, justice is denied on no better plea than the right of the strongest” (1836–1837:II:227).

In her writing and research after the study of U.S. society, Martineau continued this woman-centered sociology with investigations of women’s education, family, marriage and the law, violence against women, the tyranny of fashion, the inhumanity of the Arab harem, the inhumanity of the British treatment of prostitution, and in study after study, the nature of women’s paid work, in terms of its brutally heavy physical demands and wretchedly low wages. Her particular focus was on the wage labor of working-class women—in factories, in agriculture, in domestic service. In these studies, she brought together the double oppressions of class and gender.

Martineau did not restrict the sociology she was developing to women’s issues. She expanded her analytic efforts to an enormous number of other topics. She continued her comparative case studies with field research in Ireland and in the Middle East; the latter research was published in the three-volume work *Eastern Life: Present and Past* in 1848. Later, Martineau wrote about the origins and functions of religion; crime and its punishment; the lives of the poor; labor conflicts; colonialism and war; illness, both physical and mental; and health care practices related to illness. Her sociological perspective, although anchored in her gendered life experience and permeated by a woman-centered sensibility, did not produce only a sociology of gender. It is a general sociology with theoretical relevance for all aspects of social life.

To some extent, the most basic connection of Martineau’s sociology and her feminism was her understanding of herself as a gendered being in a world in which gender mattered and in which the fact that she was a woman would always frame others’ response to her and her work. Her consciousness of this gender framing and, consequently, of a particular duty to women is visible from her very first publications—“Female Writers on Practical Divinity” (1822) and “On Female Education” (1823)—to her great achievements, *Society in America* (1836–1837) and *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838b). She opened *Society in America* by answering the charge that her being a woman has made her research difficult—“In this I do not agree. I am sure, I have seen much more of domestic life than could possibly have been exhibited to any gentleman traveling through the country. The nursery, the boudoir, the kitchen are all excellent schools in which to learn the morals and manners of a people” (1836–1837:I:xiii).

In the end, Harriet Martineau was defeated by the very issue she knew to be inseparable from others’ reactions to her work—her gender. Although she worked with modesty, discipline, and prodigious productivity to prove her worth as a human being and a woman, and although she maintained a public reputation as a social scientist, political advocate, and intellectual in her lifetime, at her death the patriarchal currents in both general intellectual life and in sociology would flood in to defeat her. The record of her achievement would be
washed away almost without trace in the century in which the field in which she had been so creative and
dedicated—sociology—would emerge as a distinct scholarly discipline.
Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)

In her analytic writings, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, more than any other female sociologist of the classic period, approximates in tone and intention the work of her male contemporaries in sociology—Durkheim (see Chapter 7), Weber (see Chapter 8), Simmel (see Chapter 9), Mead (see Chapter 15), and Park (see Chapter 2). Gilman’s project was to present, in the impersonal, objective voice that we have come to associate with authoritative theorizing, a formal, theoretical analysis of society, understood both as a general or typical phenomenon and in its particular industrialized patternings in turn-of-the-century North Atlantic societies. Theory-building is Gilman’s method of doing sociology, and it is as a theorist that she defined her social role as a sociologist (but like Martineau, a theorist speaking to a general audience).

The Organization of Society

The Sexuo-Economic Relation

The following is a passage that presents the central thesis of Gilman’s feminist sociological theory of society:

Since we learned to study the development of human life as we study … species through the animal kingdom…. we begin to see that … our lives are the results of natural causes…. the material universe … and the effect of our own activity…. What we do, as well as what is done to us, makes us what we are. But beyond these forces, we come under the effect of a third set of conditions peculiar to our human status; namely, social conditions. In the organic interchanges which constitute social life, we are affected to a degree beyond what is found even among the most gregarious of animals. Throughout all these envoirning conditions, … economic necessities are most marked in their influence…. [and] the individual is … inexorably modified by his means of livelihood … the daily processes of supplying economic needs…. In view of these facts, attention is now called to certain marked and peculiar economic conditions affecting the human race, and unparalleled in organic life. We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation. With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation.

(Gilman, 1898/1966:1–5)
Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a woman of extraordinary energy. She was most fulfilled when she was most active, a personal experience that she would generalize to her sociological views about human nature. She published more than 2,000 works in her lifetime—novels, poetry, journalistic accounts, autobiography, and above all, sociological commentary on society, politics, and women's lives. She was an activist and organizer on women's issues, a public speaker in constant demand, the editor and sole author of her own journal, *The Forerunner*, from 1909 to 1916, and a constant traveler who crisscrossed the United States and visited Europe on several occasions.

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, on July 3, 1860, she was related on her father's side to the eminent and established Beecher family (her aunt was Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), but her own life was marked by instability and unconventionality. After her parents divorced in 1869, she was raised in genteel poverty by her mother, moving from one relative's home to another and erratically receiving education. Her first marriage, in 1884, pushed her to the edge of madness, vividly portrayed in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892/1973), and ended in divorce a decade later. Determined to have an independent lifestyle, Gilman helped effect the marriage of her best friend to her former husband and turned her daughter over to them while she pursued her public and professional career. In 1900, after several passionate attachments with other women, she married a cousin, Houghton Gilman, who was considerably younger than she and who supported her need for independence and public visibility in what was to be a very satisfactory marriage for them both.

In her own life, Gilman achieved enormous visibility. Her book *Women and Economics* (1898/1966) went through nine editions in her lifetime, was translated into seven languages, and was reviewed by the male establishment and by almost all the women...
sociologists discussed in this chapter—Addams, Kelley, Taft, Weber, and Webb. All her other sociological books received significant attention. She was an active member of both sociological and economic scholarly communities, an occasional resident at Hull House, and a cofounder, with Jane Addams, of the Women’s Peace Party. Like many feminist writers today, Gilman experimented with the forms in which her views of the individual in society might be presented. But the overwhelming majority of her 2,173 publications (Scharnhorst, 1985) were social commentary and analysis. She published hundreds of articles of this type, not only in her own journal, The Forerunner, but also in mainstream publications like The Independent and sociological journals such as the American Journal of Sociology, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and Publications of the American Sociological Society, which later became the American Sociological Review (Keith, 1991).

Ill with inoperable breast cancer, she died by her own hand on August 17, 1935.

Gilman argued that in the foundational social institutions, the economy and the family, we find a basic stratificational practice that explains most of the ills observable in societies, in individual experience, and in history: that practice is gender inequality. Gilman, who like all the writers of this period lacked the term and concept “gender,” used the term excessive sex distinction to name the stratificational practice she identified and theorized. “Sex” in her usage conflates physiological sex traits with sociocultural gender processes and sociocultural emotional patterning of sexuality. “Excessive” sex distinction is the marking of differences between men and women beyond that which arises directly out of biological reproduction. Thus conceptualized, gender stratification is the primary tension in the economies of all known societies, producing, in effect, two sex classes—men as a “master class” and women as a class of subordinated and disempowered social beings. Gilman called this pattern the sexuo-economic relation.

Gilman’s explication of the consequences of this sexuo-economic arrangement parallels Marx’s exploration of the implications of economic class conflict for history and society. For Gilman, as for Marx, the economy is the basic social institution, the area of physical human work that produces individual and social life and moves society progressively forward. It is through work that individuals potentially realize their species-nature as agentic producers. Our personalities are formed by our actual experiences of work. In her best-known work, the novella The Yellow Wallpaper, written in 1892, six years before her first sociological book, Women and Economics, Gilman horrifyingly dramatizes this theme as the female first-person narrator descends into madness because of the inactivity enforced on her by her doctor-husband and relatives, that is, by the sexuo-economic arrangements in society. This understanding of human nature is developed in all of Gilman’s sociological writings: meaningful work is the essence of human self-realization; restricting or denying the individual access to meaningful work reduces the individual to a condition of nonhumanity. This is the criterion by which she judges the essential fairness or unfairness of the society in place.

The sexuo-economic arrangement presents just this barrier to self-actualizing work, for both women and men, though for women much more than for men. This systemic pollution of the human essence leads not merely to individual unhappiness but to an enormous catalogue of social pathologies: class conflict, political corruption, distorted sexuality, greed, poverty, waste and environmental exploitation, inhumane conditions in both wage labor and unpaid household labor, harmful educational practices, child neglect and abuse, ideological excess, war, and, above all, a systemic structural condition of human alienation. Working systematically through this comprehensive and critical theory of society and gender is the project of Gilman’s feminist sociology.
Gilman developed this thesis across six books of sociological theory: *Women and Economics* (1898/1966) lays out her basic thesis; *Concerning Children* (1900) presents her theory of child development, socialization, education, gender education, and the essential reforms needed in all these areas; *The Home* (1903) is an exploration of the contemporary household and of the organization of domestic work, with radical, concrete suggestions for the reorganization of this institution, and consequently for both family relations and society; *Human Work* (1904) offers an ambitious assessment of both paid and unpaid human labor and of human alienation and class struggle in contemporary society; *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911) traces the ramifications of cultural themes of masculinity and femininity on “family, health and beauty, art, literature, games and sports, ethics and religion, education, society and fashion, law and government, crime and punishment, politics and warfare, and industry and economics” (Ceplair, 1991:189); and *His Religion and Hers* (1923) explores religion as an institution from a consciously feminist sociological viewpoint. In combination, these books give us as comprehensive an analysis of society as any offered by Gilman’s male contemporaries—an analysis that traces the complex interaction between materiality and ideas in the sexuo-economic relation.

**Origins of Gender Stratification**

Central to much of Gilman’s work is an exploration of the processes that produce gender stratification. She used evolutionary imagery in much the same way as Engels, for example, in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884/1970), develops a mythic prehistory for humankind. But stripped of this imagery, Gilman in fact makes a remarkable claim: *man’s domination of woman springs from his need for sociability with or recognition by an Other.* This is an argument with much currency in modern feminism (J. Benjamin, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1995). Gilman writes in *Women and Economics*:

> The human individual [has] the imperative demand for the establishment of a common consciousness between … hitherto irreconcilable individuals. The first step in nature towards this end is found in the relation between mother and child … [when] we have the overlapping of personality, the mutual need … that holds together these interacting personalities.… Therefore between the mother and child [is] born … the common consciousness … mutual attraction.… As the male…. steadily encroaches upon the freedom of the female until she is reduced to the state of … dependence … he fulfils … in his own person the thwarted uses of maternity … [the] common interest, existing now not only between mother and child, but between father, mother and child.

*(Gilman, 1898/1966:124–125)*

Out of this primary though distorted need for sociability or recognition arises male domination and female subordination. “So he instituted the custom of enslaving the female” (Gilman, 1898/1966:60), psychologically bonding with her while increasingly appropriating all economic agency in the relationship and thus all relational control. She, thus, becomes increasingly dependent, increasingly disempowered economically, increasingly maimed in terms of personal growth. Gender will be her only instrument of countervailing power,
the wiles of femininity, a focus on sexuality, the fact as well as the ploy of her economic helplessness.

**Androcentric Culture**

Out of this class arrangement arises masculinity and femininity as pervasive cultural themes—the aggressive, assertive man, the yielding, compliant woman. These structures become deeply embedded in the dailiness of habit and go sociologically unscrutinized because they are assumed to be attributes of the individual person. From birth on, socialization and education inculcate these relational, structural, and stratificational modes, and all of culture conspires to reinforce them through life. Thus the sexuo-economic relation is continuously reproduced by androcentric culture.

**Public and Private Spheres**

The ramifications of this system are not only psychological and cultural; they profoundly penetrate and distort economic and community life. The sexuo-economic arrangement gives rise to the individual family, the individual mating or married couple, the individual household. Unlike economic class relations, dominants and subordinates in the sexuo-economic system are intimately linked in pairs, each pair isolated in its own “little household.” Society can be understood as dividing between the public economy of the marketplace and the private economy of the household. The first is the sphere of manly action, and women are marginal to it. The second is the sphere of women’s labor, labor dependent on the economic power of the man. The household is an area of untrained, unprofessional demanding labor, wasteful of the woman, wasteful of society’s economic resources in its replication of need from house to house—an area often of unregulated consumption. The market is a place where man’s gender power becomes an oppressive economic responsibility for the provision of his household. From this pressure arises a social system encouraging individualism, competition, conflict, class divisions, excessive greed, and wealth, hand in hand with crippling exploitation and deprivation. In this pathological system, people wander unguided into whatever occupation comes to hand, and there, trapped by the burden of the household, they remain if they can, “square pegs in round holes,” hanging on to security, but in their deep unfulfillment doing second-rate work, and thus reproducing the incompetence, waste, inefficiency, and alienation of the contemporary economy (Gilman, 1904:157–226).

**Feminism**

The solution to this wasteful sexuo-economic arrangement is to break up the arrangement of the sex classes. The first step to achieving this is the economic emancipation of women—one goal of the women’s movement of Gilman’s own day, as it is in ours. This goal is not a simple one for Gilman. It requires fundamental changes in gender socialization and in education. It requires the physical development of women to their full size and strength, a rethinking and renegotiation of the personal, relational, and sexual expectations between women and men. But most basically, it requires the rational dismantling and reconstruction of the institution of the household, so that women can have freedom to do the work they choose and so that society may thus be enriched by their labor. In this last strategy, we have Gilman’s most novel and problematic approach to a revolution in gender relations. In extraordinary detail she set herself the project of redesigning domestic space and domestic activity. In Gilman’s transformed world of the home, each person will have “a room of their
own” and space for association with the family of their choice and construction. Child care, food service, laundry, and household cleaning will be handled professionally by enlightened, well-paid workers, in humane work spaces—and by people who find their calling and their dignity in such work. Surrounding them all—those working in the newly designed domestic spaces, those being reared there, and those coming “home” there from work elsewhere—will be cultural, intellectual, recreational, and health facilities for the new communal lifestyle, paid for by the saving from earlier wasteful domestic drudgery and earlier wasteful marketplace drudgery. This scenario was Gilman’s utopia, as communism was Marx’s utopia. In its closest real-world realization, perhaps, and on a scale much smaller than Gilman envisioned, this was the organizational form of Jane Addams’s Hull House, which we discuss later in the chapter.

Erasure

Although she did everything that one might expect of a significant sociological theorist who wrote in English, which means she has always been accessible to American sociologists, Charlotte Perkins Gilman has been systematically written out of American sociology’s construction of its past. Gilman was a member of the American Sociological Society from its foundation in 1895 to her death in 1935. She presented before its annual convention in 1908 and 1909. Her writing is replete with the awareness that she is bringing a sociological consciousness to her work. Her tone is recognizably that of the sociological theorist, for whom theory is her intended project. That theory includes the familiar “markers” of classical sociological theory—comparison with other species (Darwin, Spencer, Park, Mead); an assumption of human societal development (Spencer, Durkheim, Weber, Mead, Park); conditioning social facts (Marx, Durkheim) and interactions (Simmel, Mead, Park); and the centrality of economic life (Marx, Weber). The arrangement of these arguments is both sufficiently familiar and sufficiently innovative to distinguish Gilman’s work as a distinctive body of theory. It is true that social evolutionary vocabulary permeates many of her statements and that these referents have fallen out of favor, but Spencer, Durkheim, Mead, and Park—even, to a degree, Marx—also weaved this vocabulary through their presentations. Together with the explications of her theoretical effort, and its embedded sociological referents, we also have the massive production of her writings, their enormous visibility in her own time, and her explicit engagement with and acknowledgment by the professional sociological communities—both male and female—of her day.

Only a complex process of antiwoman and antifeminist bias explains Gilman’s disappearance from the record of sociology and sociological theory. As with all the other women discovered in this chapter, Gilman’s gender diminished her authority as a sociological spokesperson in an increasingly male-dominated profession. So, too, did her women-centered concerns—home, children, sexuality, housework, gender identity, femininity, and masculinity. Moreover, her activist and feminist stance might have made her seem too political and valuational to a field moving rapidly toward a value-neutral stance, a field that by the 1930s had made Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation” and “Science as a Vocation” guiding documents. Without a large population of women in the profession or a strong feminist movement in society after 1920, Gilman could be first marginalized and then allowed to disappear. Only with the reversal of both these trends has the work of recovery begun (J. Allen, 2011; Deutscher, 2004; Ganobcsik-Williams, 1999; M. Hill, 2005; M. Hill and Deegan, 2004; Salinas, 2004; Schaefer, 2004; Squier, 2007; Van Staveren, 2003; Wolosky, 2003).
Jane Addams (1860–1935) and the Chicago Women’s School

At the same time that men at the University of Chicago were building what was to become “the Chicago school” (see Chapter 2), the group of women we shall call “the Chicago women’s school” were also creating a sociology and a sociological theory. The focal energy in this group was Jane Addams (1860–1935). The women worked out of two bases, the University of Chicago and Hull House, the settlement founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in 1889. Although connected to the men of the University of Chicago (Deegan, 1988), these women formed their real professional and personal networks with each other (Fitzpatrick, 1990; Gordon, 1994; Muncy, 1991; R. Rosenberg, 1982). It is hard to overstate the significance of this network for the women personally, for U.S. history in the Progressive Era (1880–1916) and beyond, and for a feminist reconstruction of the history of sociology. This network included women who studied or taught at the University of Chicago and/or who lived as residents or did research instituted by Hull House. Besides Addams, this network included Edith and Grace Abbott, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Florence Kelley, Frances Kellor, Julia Lathrop, Annie Marion MacLean, Virginia Robinson, Anna Garlin Spencer, Jessie Taft, and Marion Talbot, among others. They were part of a larger women’s network described by Gordon (1994), “social innovators” (J. Scott, 1964) who devised an astounding range of policies and associations to protect subordinate groups as the United States confronted the effects of the Industrial Revolution and its own classist, racist, and sexist politics. Furthermore, this network touched the lives and work of other women discussed in this chapter: Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a resident at Hull House from 1895 to 1896; Marianne Weber visited there, as did Beatrice Potter Webb; Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Jane Addams were partners in the struggle for African American and women’s rights. (To close the circle, we note that Edith Abbott [1906] wrote an article on Harriet Martineau in the Journal of Political Economy, and Martineau herself had written a lively description of Chicago as a frontier settlement in 1836.)

The Social Role of the Sociologist

The women of Chicago defined the purpose of sociology and their role as sociologists as the reform and improvement of society. The years from 1890 to 1914 were a golden era for the reform movement of “Progressivism.” Inspired by the theories of “reform Social Darwinism,” the teaching of the “social gospel,” and the philosophy of pragmatism, Progressives sought to take control of the chaotic and exploitative conditions of life created by the interconnected events of the Industrial Revolution, the influx of immigrants, and the rise of the cities.

Although battling intense sexism in university and professional life (Deegan, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1990; R. Rosenberg, 1982), the women used sociological theory, analysis, and research to win numerous victories for the rights of women and for the Progressive movement. The Chicago women helped lead the fight for women’s suffrage, factory legislation, child labor laws, protection of working women, aid for dependent mothers and children, better sanitation in the cities, trade unions, arbitration of labor disputes, minimum wages, and minimum-wage boards. Much of what the women fought for became the stuff of New Deal
legislation in the 1930s.

Jane Addams and the women of Chicago were both products and creators of this extraordinary period. What they may have created above all was a tremendous energy born of the faith that indeed something could be done.

**Jane Addams (1860–1935)**

Jane Addams, by her life and example, helped create the career possibility of “social activist.” Her sociology grew directly out of her social activism, but until about twenty years ago, she was remembered only for her social activism. The work of reclaiming Addams as a sociologist and locating her career in the gender politics of sociology has been done in Mary Jo Deegan’s landmark study, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918* (1988) and extended in Elshtain (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2008), Gross (2009), R. Hewitt (2008), Knight (2006), Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (1998, 2001a, 2002, 2006), Moyers (2003), D. Ross (1998), Seigfried (1996), and Whipps (2004). Here we focus on Addams’s sociological theory.

**The Basic Thesis**

What distinguishes Addams from the other reformist arguments of early sociologists is her proposition that the particular amelioration that is needed in her time is to create a society based in the practice of a “democratic social ethics,” that is, to achieve the democratic transformation of all parts of the society through the inculcation of social ethics. Social ethics is Addams’s most original concept and the lynchpin of her theory; it is what united the goal of a society that is democratic in all its relations with the practical action necessary to its achievement. Addams spent much of her career elaborating on the meaning of, and the strategies necessary for, creating social ethics. Here, we offer a starting definition that we will expand on as we explore Addams’s theory. In its simplest form, Addams defines social ethics as the practice of rules of right relationship that produce and sustain in the individual an orientation to action based on “concern for the welfare of a community” or “identification with the common lot” (1902/1907:226, 11).

**Methods**

To understand her theory, we must first understand something about the epistemology and method undergirding it. Addams chose her life’s work as an activist and social theorist after a series of experiences of “bifurcated consciousness,” the awareness of a division between formal textual descriptions of life and one’s own lived experience (Dorothy Smith, 1987). For Addams, this bifurcation was in the division between the world seen through literature read in college and a series of glimpses of the real life of the poor as she traveled in Europe after graduation. Addams condemned herself for doing what she felt many women of her class were doing, substituting sentiment and book learning for action. Her sociological theory reflects her attempt to turn herself to life and action and in that attempt she adopted a philosophical pragmatist epistemology—truth emerges through living: “While I may receive valuable suggestions from classic literature, when I really want to learn about life, I must depend upon my neighbors, for, as William James insists, the most instructive human documents live along the beaten pathway” (Addams, 1916:xi). As a pragmatist, Addams values her own experience over textual authority.
Because she “privileged” personal experience over theory, Addams had a distinctive method of doing sociology and creating theory. Her analysis was developed not so much through the crafting of theoretical generalizations as through the presentation of paradigmatic case studies from participant observation and key informants at Hull House and in the city of Chicago. She made fewer generalizations than did most male theorists, she rarely spoke in their tone of detached objectivity, and her illustrations are strikingly concrete and particular. She illustrated a point not with hypothetical, ahistorical figures, but with detailed accounts of the lives of men and women she knew. Addams sought something more than verstehen; she sought to establish what contemporary feminist theorists call for in research: an authentic, caring relation between the researcher and the subject of the research. This practice she called “the neighborly relation” as it emerged for her out of her living as a neighbor in the Hull House community. In all her research Addams pursues the issue of vantage point—the practice of rendering accounts of social reality from the perspectives of the various individuals involved.

The Organization of Society

Addams developed the central tenet of her sociological theory, the need for a social ethic, on the basis of a series of implicit propositions about the fundamental organization of society, human nature, and social change. Addams envisioned society as a vast network of individual human beings coming together to realize both material interests and ethical ideals. This network took form in a variety of diverse and not necessarily analytically parallel structures—family, household, neighborhood, industry, education, war and peace, philanthropy, recreation, art. Her interest was not in establishing the appropriate analytic categories to name these structures—“institutions,” “organizations,” “processes”—but in seeing how to make them all possess certain common qualities—qualities of social democracy—that she assumed that evolution demanded.
Jane Addams, though often trivialized in popular schooling as an ever-beloved “Lady Bountiful,” was a deeply thoughtful, ethically committed person, of only modest personal wealth, who genuinely tried to love her neighbors and who in her lifetime both was on the FBI’s list of “most dangerous radicals” (during the 1920s “Red Scare”) and won the Nobel Peace Prize (in 1931).

Born in Cedarville, Illinois, on September 6, 1860, into a family involved in both business and politics, she attended Rockford Seminary, where she began some serious spiritual thinking and excelled academically, graduating as valedictorian in 1881.

The years from 1881 to 1888, when she at last settled on the plan that would become Hull House, were difficult ones—marked by her father’s death, her own illness, and illness in her family, which demanded her attention. Worse though, she found that she did not know what to do with her life; she had leisure but not purpose. In her travels in Europe, she gradually formed the conviction that she should try to imitate the settlement experiment she had seen in London.

In 1889, she and Ellen Gates Starr arranged to rent Hull House on Halsted Street in Chicago’s nineteenth ward, an area of impoverished working-class immigrants. Their plan, which Addams recounts in Twenty Years at Hull-House (1910/1990), was to try to learn and help by living simply as neighbors among the poor. Addams showed a remarkable ability to do just that. Hull House attracted other “residents,” mainly educated young women who wanted to put their education to use. Collectively they embarked upon a range of social experiments, including social clubs, garbage collection, apartments for working women, consumer cooperatives, evening classes, trade unions, industrial reform legislation, investigations of working conditions, debating societies, and interventions in strikes, solutions to unemployment, and platforms for Hull House debates. Hull House became identified in the
public mind of Addams’s own day not simply with good works but with radical thought and change. This identification was all but sealed when Addams held to her commitment to pacifism during the patriotic fervor of World War I.

Following the pragmatic creed of testing the truth of ideas by experience, Addams drew on her Hull House work to develop a sociological theory based on the conviction that people had now to begin to work collectively and cooperatively—which meant learning to tolerate differences. She traces the need for cooperation and growth in understanding in a series of books and articles, among the most important of which are *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910), *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902/1907), *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907), *The Long Road of Woman's Memory* (1916), *Peace and Bread in Times of War* (1922), and *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1930).

Her most noted personal quality—her ability to understand another person’s position without necessarily agreeing with it and to communicate that understanding—may also be the quality that most emerges for the feminist reader of her sociology. Her long-time friend Emily Greene Balch remembered Addams’s special concern with vantage point: “Significant of her relation to her Halsted Street neighbors is the habit that she had when she made a speech about Hull House of taking one of them with her so that they all knew that when Hull House was described to important people downtown it sounded exactly like Hull House as they knew it” (1941/1972:206). Jane Addams died on May 21, 1935.

Human Nature and Ethics

Addams understood the human being to be an embodied subjectivity, that is, a mind capable of reason and emotion, in a body that materially experiences the world. The democratic social ideal rests in the recognition of the independent agentic subjectivity of this embodied subject. This capacity of the individual subjectivity to hold to her or his own will or sense of the world has been, Addams argued, too little realized in social thought. She criticized the “first type of humanitarian who loves the people without really knowing them … and expects the people whom he does not know to forswear altogether the right of going their own way, and to be convinced of the beauty and value of his way” (Addams, 1905:425–426). Drawing on her Hull House experience, Addams argued that a democracy cannot be built by people who expect other people to “see the light,” that such demands for change are grounded in a lack of respect for the vantage point of the other.

Further, she conceived of human subjectivity as a complex of reason and emotion, especially the emotion of kindness. On the basis of this understanding of human nature, Addams rested her argument that ethical systems are a foundational feature of social life. She saw reason and emotion working together, manifesting themselves in the coexistence in the individual of rational judgment and sympathy. All people, no matter how materially hard-pressed, desire “an outlet for more kindliness,” seek “to do a favor for a friend,” to find expression for that “kindheartedness [that] lies in ambush to incorporate itself in our larger relations,” hoping that “it shall be given some form of governmental expression” (Addams, 1907:2–3). Addams described this desire as what the French mean in the “phrase *l'imperieuse bonté* by which they designate those impulses towards compassionate conduct which will not be denied” (1907:21). The idea of human beings desiring sociality is well developed in sociology in the theories of Simmel, Mead, W. I. Thomas, and Park. But the extension of this desire into a description of an embodied person who actively seeks to be in right or ethical relation with others is Addams’s distinctive contribution.

Social Production and Ethics

The human being is located in a society that is always evolving or changing, but this process of change is one that humans must now control through the collective exercise of mind. Change does not necessarily proceed
at the same pace in all parts of society; many social problems are the result of a disjunction between the rate and type of change in one part and those of another—a disjunction that Addams and other women of Chicago spoke of as “belatedness.” Although Addams saw that industrial change was forcing adjustments in other areas of social life, she did not accept that the material base always determines the pace and direction of change. Rather, she viewed materiality and ideas as mutually interdependent; ethical systems must be aligned with the social relations of production, but will in turn determine the forms of those relations. She explained social tensions much less in terms of class conflict than of people caught in processes of change that they have not yet brought into alignment.

The Social Ethic

Addams found herself at a moment in history when humans had to, by the invention of new means of association, realize the democratic social ethic.

We are … brought to a conception of Democracy not merely as a sentiment which desires the well-being of all men, nor yet as a creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all men, but as that which affords a rule of living as well as a test of faith…. To attain individual morality in an age demanding social morality, to pride oneself on the results of personal effort when the time demands social adjustment, is utterly to fail to apprehend the situation.

(Addams, 1902/1907:2–3, 6)

A democratic social ethic would be based on the facts, revealed in one’s own experience, that (1) no “one set of people are of so much less importance than another, that a valuable side of life pertaining to them should be sacrificed for the other” (Addams, 1902/1907:124); (2) that all people may be active agents, not simply included in the hopes of some elite but themselves actively hoping, planning, participating, thinking; (3) that as active agents all people seek opportunities to enact the imperative to kindliness which has evolved in humanity, and (4) that the personal safety of all members of the democratic social unit is tied to the personal safety of each.

Much of Addams’s sociological theory is devoted to analyzing how to transform democracy from a political creed, enacted occasionally in elections, into a social creed informing all human interactions. One problem is that people cling to belated ethics that are misaligned or inappropriate to the organization of material production that Addams saw as characterized by “the discovery of the power to combine” (1895:183).

Belated Ethics

The belated ethic of individualism shows itself in the insistence of owners on keeping absolute control of production processes, enforcing specialization on the workers and refusing to share organizational control with them. “The division of labor” instituted by the factory owner “robs” the workers of a common and shared interest in their work and leaves only “the mere mechanical fact of interdependence” (Addams, 1902/1907:211). This alienation can be overcome only by an industrial democracy that allows workers to
participate in the organization of production.

Within the household and family, the belated ethic of the family claim restricts women’s sense of ethical responsibility for the larger society, leading them to feel ethically adequate even when they exploit their domestic help so long as the needs of their family and immediate circle of friends are addressed. Addams’s arguments for women’s suffrage turn not upon any assertion of natural rights (an assertion she felt assumed a fixed rather than an evolving human nature), but upon her understanding that changes in the organization of society brought new duties and required new ethics. The dominant fact of her age—the growth in size and complexity of human relationships—meant that women could no longer live within the narrow confines of the family claim. Indeed, if they were to take care of their families in this new world, they must assume a social ethic, which meant taking responsibility for the welfare of the whole community to which they were now irrevocably attached.

**Situated Vantage Points**

In establishing the social ethic, a second problem is that the practice depends upon an ability to take the vantage point of the other. A recurring theme in the narratives Addams used to present her social theory is the clash of standpoints: the failure of an elite class to understand the real and valuable ethics of the poor, the lack of a general ethic that understands the world of multiple viewpoints, the difference between “organized” charity and neighborly outreach.

Let us take a neighborhood of poor people, and test their ethical standards by those of the charity visitor…. A most striking incongruity, at once apparent, is the difference between the emotional kindness with which relief is given by one poor neighbor, and the guarded care with which relief is given by the charity visitor to the charity recipient. The neighborhood mind is at once confronted not only by the difference of method, but by an absolute clashing of two ethical standards.

(Addams, 1902/1907:20–21)

**Learning the Social Ethic**

Addams offered three strategies for establishing democratic social ethics as the necessary complement to industrialization. One strategy is that people can be taught the legitimacy of the social claim through formal education if the educational system is reformed, along lines suggested by Dewey (a frequent Hull House visitor), to “give the child’s own social experience a value” (Addams, 1902/1907:180). But the schools often fail to teach this principle of “connectedness” because “the same tendency to division of labor has also produced over-specialization in scholarship, with the sad result that … the scholar … cannot bring healing and solace because he himself is suffering from the same disease” (Addams, 1902/1907:206).

A second way for people to learn democracy as a way of relating is through constant and varied experiences of social interaction; people learn to work together by working together. People can change old habits and develop new norms and sensibilities through social interaction “not so much by the teaching of moral
theorems [but] by the direct expression of social sentiments and by the cultivation of practical habits” (Addams, 1907:8). Hull House, trade unions, labor arbitration, social clubs, debating societies, elections, government committees, and neighborhood organizations were, for Addams, avenues for the direct expression of social sentiments and the cultivation of practical habits of social interaction.

A third way Addams saw change occurring is in individuals’ “memory”—or reflection shared and retold with others. In The Long Road of Woman’s Memory (1916), Addams linked women’s memory, or individual subjectivity, and social change, arguing that memory is used in two different but often complementary ways: for “interpreting and appeasing life for the individual” and as “a selective agency in social reorganization” (Addams, 1916:xi). People often remember events of their lives in ways that lead them to react against conventions or to reinterpret their part in historic changes so as to experience their own connectedness. The Long Road of Woman’s Memory contains some of Addams’s most persuasive case histories. Through these histories, Addams argued, memory may be a kind of consciousness-raising in which people realign themselves with the larger impersonal forces that have shaped their lives and in that realignment prepare the way for social change.

The Chicago Women’s School

Addams’s core belief—that society needs not individual but collective action realized in democratic association—is clearly visible in the relationships, work, and sociology of the circle we call “the Chicago women’s school”: Edith and Grace Abbott, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Florence Kelley, Frances Kellor, Julia Lathrop, Annie Marion MacLean, Virginia Robinson, Anna Garlin Spencer, Jessie Taft, and Marion Talbot, among others. It is possible, as Gordon (1994) has documented, to see these women as clannish and inbred, but it is also possible to see this network of women possessing, as both Gordon (1994:70) and Costin (1983:100) quoted, what Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter described as “a rare degree of disinterestedness and indifference to the share of [their] own ego in the cosmos.” A recovery of these women as sociologists is as yet only partial (Clark and Foster 2006; Garcia Dauder, 2008; Gil Juárez, 2008; Hallett and Jeffers, 2008; Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1998/2007; Timming, 2004).

The Organization of Society and Social Role of the Sociologist

Four major propositions frame the sociological theory of the Chicago women’s school. First, the fundamental organizational principle of modern society is the interdependence of human beings and of the structures in which they come together. One cannot separately analyze industry, family, neighborhood, education, recreation, municipal government, and so on. Every person and activity potentially relates to every other. Everything that happens potentially affects women’s lives, and women must find ways to exercise greater power. Second, people must now act collectively to shape the environment and direct future human development, a proposition that turns on an understanding of the human being as an agentic moral agent. The world is evolving not by the action of some invisible law but through the efforts of men and women. These efforts, heretofore uncoordinated, now require that people become inventive in forms of association and in the formulation of state policies as one means for the enactment of the collective will. Third, the groups most affected by change and the failures to control change are the socially disenfranchised: women, children,
the elderly poor, immigrants, African Americans, and working-class and poor people in general. This proposition reflects a basic critical position of “equity,” that is, that all people are entitled to a fair share of society’s goods. Fourth, the role of the social scientist is to give people the tools for understanding and action by presenting facts about social conditions, plans for associations, and proposals for state policies. Besides conducting research, the Chicago women helped found the Urban League, the National Consumers League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (later to be the American Association of University Women), and other associations for social amelioration.

Methods

Perhaps because these women reinforced each other in this view of society, certainly because they were philosophic pragmatists, their sociological theory came to focus on those epistemological issues typically denoted as methodology. One of their great sociological innovations is the methods they designed for studying and publicizing a problem—indeed, they were inventors of “social problems,” in the sense that they took situations that most people took for granted as unavoidable and redefined them as subject to social control, social improvement, and social elimination. In presenting the taken-for-granted as a social problem, these women invented an array of techniques for discovering and reporting their evidence using both primary and secondary quantitative and qualitative data sources—personal and historic documents, statistical tables, maps of demographic traits, interviews, key informants, participant observations, and photographs. Good examples of the use of multiple research strategies are Edith Abbott’s *Women in Industry* (1910) and *The Tenements of Chicago* (1936/1970), Sophonisba Breckinridge’s *New Homes for Old* (1921/1971), Frances Kellor’s *Out of Work* (1904/1915), and *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895), compiled under the general direction of Florence Kelley. Probably the first published report of sociological participant observation is Annie Marion MacLean’s “Two Weeks in Department Stores,” in the *American Journal of Sociology*, May 1899, which illustrates the Chicago women’s attention to methodology, their emphasis on empirical data, their commitment to fostering social change, and their interconnectedness as thinkers and researchers. MacLean undertook this research as part of the work of the new Consumers’ League of Illinois, “organized by the collegiate alumnae” of Chicago as an early attempt to get consumers to use their power to improve working conditions for women and children. MacLean introduced her purpose in this way:

The necessity for a thorough investigation of the work of women and children in the large department stores in the city was apparent and the difficulties manifold. With a view to ascertaining some things which could be learned only from the inside, … it seemed evident that valuable information could be obtained if someone were willing to endure the hardships of the saleswoman’s life, and from personal experience be able to pass judgment upon observed conditions. [This] led me to join the ranks of the retail clerks for two weeks during the rush of the holiday trade.

(MacLean, 1899:721–722)

Collective Action and Social Change
The most daring explorations of collective action may have been done by Florence Kelley (1859–1932), who in 1887 published both the first English translation of Engels’s *The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844* and a remarkable work of her own, “The Need for Theoretical Preparation for Philanthropic Work.” The theoretical preparation Kelley proposes is the application of Marxist theory to philanthropy. In this essay, which she first presented at a meeting of the New York chapter of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, Kelley argued that all bourgeois philanthropy, no matter how well intended, is really only a palliative, a restitution to the working class, the real creators of wealth, of what has been taken from them. She presented an absolute statement of class conflict, describing a “division of society into two warring classes,” producing two different kinds of philanthropy, bourgeois and proletarian.

Our bourgeois philanthropy, whatever form it may take, is really only the effort to give back to the workers a little bit of that which our whole social system, systematically, robs them of, and so to prop up that system yet a little longer…. It is the workers who produce all values; but the lion’s share of what they produce falls to the lion—the capitalist class…. For the capitalist class as a whole, all philanthropic effort is a work of restitution for self-preservation.

(Kelley, 1887/1986:94)

Settling into work at Hull House, Kelley became Chief Inspector of Factories under the reform Illinois Factory and Workshop Inspection Law of 1893. She fought its gutting by the Illinois Supreme Court until she was replaced by the next governor for a too vigorous enforcement. Her analysis of this and other attempts at reform legislation are offered in *Some Ethical Gains through Legislation* (1905/1969).

Momentarily defeated in terms of state policies, Kelley turned her attention to the possibility of voluntary associations bringing about changes in industrial organization. By the end of 1899, she published in the *American Journal of Sociology* “Aims and Principles of the Consumers’ League.” In this article Kelley attempted to give consciousness to a new social category, “consumers.” She called consumers into being as a conscious social aggregate to redress the balance between capital and labor, which the state seemed impotent or unwilling to do.

Throughout our lives we are choosing, or choice is made for us, as to the disposal of money…. As we [make these choices], we help to decide, however unconsciously, how our fellow-men shall spend their time in making what we buy…. Those of us who enjoy the privilege of voting may help, once or twice in a year…. But all of us, all the time, are deciding by our expenditures what industries shall survive at all, and under what conditions. Broadly stated, it is the aim of the National Consumers’ League to moralize this decision, to gather and make available information which may enable us all to decide in the light of knowledge, and to appeal to the consciences, so that the decision when made shall be a righteous one.

(Kelley, 1899:289–290)
The essential principles of the sociology of the Chicago women are all in this statement: that social science must act for change; that all citizens, including women still denied suffrage, are nevertheless morally responsible for the welfare of the country; that every action ties a person to other people; that effective personal virtue today must be done through associations because it is only in associations that people can gain the knowledge and the power to make their individual action truly “righteous”—that is, both democratic and effective.
Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) and Ida Wells-Barnett (1862–1931)

Anna Julia Cooper and Ida Wells-Barnett were African American women of the same generation as Gilman, Addams, and many of the Chicago women sociologists discussed in the previous section. Their ideas are being incorporated into classical sociological theory by contemporary feminist sociologists (Broschart, 1991b; P. Collins, 1990; Deegan, 1991) and by sociologists and others influenced by feminism (Bailey, 2004; Glass, 2005; Lemert, 1995, 1999; Lemert and Bhan, 1998; May, 2004; Schechter 2001). Although it is possible that neither Cooper nor Wells-Barnett identified herself as a sociologist, both women worked out of an explicitly acknowledged sociological orientation. Wells-Barnett opens her empirical study of lynching, *A Red Record*, with a claim to a sociological perspective:

> The student of American sociology will find the year 1894 marked by a pronounced awakening of the public conscience to a system of anarchy and outlawry which had grown up during [the past] ten years.

(Wells-Barnett, 1895/1969:7)
Anna Julia Hayward Cooper was born a slave in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1858, to a slave mother and to a master whom she presumed, was also her father. Freed by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and apparently of extraordinary intellectual ability, she battled racism, sexism, and limited finances all her life in pursuit of an education. By age nine she was working as a “pupil-teacher” at St. Augustine’s Normal and Collegiate Institute, an Episcopal freedman’s school for African Americans, where she was one of a very few female students. She worked her way, as a student-tutor, through Oberlin College in the 1880s—Oberlin being one of the very few white colleges to admit blacks—earning her bachelor’s degree in 1884 and an honorary master’s degree in 1887. Supporting herself all her life as a teacher, she taught for forty years in the Washington, D.C., school system, where from 1901 to 1906 she served as principal of the M Street High School (later Dunbar High School), the second black woman principal in the school’s history. From that base, she actively fought racism on behalf of her students and herself, lectured widely, and in 1892 published *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman from the South*, the primary statement of her sociological views. Studying at Columbia University and at the Sorbonne, in Paris, during summer breaks and various leaves of absence, she completed the work for her doctoral degree from the Sorbonne in 1925, defending her dissertation and accepting her degree at age 65. Her dissertation, *Slavery and the French Revolutionists (1788–1805)*, was written in French (she was a gifted linguist) and has been available in English only since 1988. These two works, which show Cooper to be a significant sociological theorist of race and society both in the United States and globally, form the basis of our discussion here.
Ida Wells-Barnett was born to slave parents in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862. After supporting her orphaned siblings while working as a teacher from 1878 to 1883, she moved to Memphis in 1883, where she studied at both Fiske and LeMoyne Institute. A lifelong activist on behalf of African American and women’s rights, she worked primarily as a journalist, initiating a one-woman campaign against lynching in 1883 with a series of publications that present a detailed empirical study of that horrific practice of racial terrorism. That campaign would build into a national and international protest. Living in Chicago for most of her adult life, Wells-Barnett was well acquainted with Jane Addams, Hull House, and the activist social-science work of that institution (Wells-Barnett, 1970). A prominent figure in the women’s club movement of this period, Wells-Barnett helped found the National Association of Colored Women, the National Afro-American Council, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Her writings on lynching were compiled into a single volume, On Lynchings, published in 1969.

Cooper, in her best-known book, A Voice from the South, wrote about Comte and Spencer and presented her most general principle of societal organization as a sociological one:

This … law holds good in sociology as in the world of matter, that equilibrium, not repression among conflicting forces is the condition of natural harmony, of permanent progress, and of universal freedom.

(Cooper, 1892/1969:160)

Cooper and Wells-Barnett both consciously drew on their lived experiences as African American women to develop a “systematic consciousness of society and social relations.” They lay the foundation for a feminist sociological theory based in the interests of women of color.
Methods

Ida Wells-Barnett was primarily a researcher whose theory of society is implicit in her research. This research is sociological and inventive. It uses statistics, interviews, and secondary accounts to describe the lynching of African Americans that became epidemic in the southern United States during the 1890s (and continued into the 1930s) and to analyze the causes of this development. Wells-Barnett’s method is a pioneering adaptation of secondary data analysis that uses the oppressor’s own reports as the main source. She built her analysis on white newspaper reports of lynchings in an effort to protect herself from the charge of distorting her research. She then “deconstructed” those reports to find their underlying themes of domination and oppression.

Cooper, in contrast, was explicitly engaged in theoretical work. She sought to describe the patterns of social life and to situate herself in that work of theoretical creation. Although her theory of societal organization was more extensively developed than Wells-Barnett’s, Cooper also used the oppressor’s own texts—statistics, popular literature, and historical records—as a key database.

The Lens of Race Relations

Groups and Power

In the social theory of both Cooper and Wells-Barnett, power is the fundamental relation of social life. They understood that power can range from manipulation to unqualified physical oppression and that power resources can include coercion, material advantage, ideology, interactional norms, communication—and pure passion, the will to dominate.

Cooper and Wells-Barnett base this theory of power on their understanding of race relations. Cooper wrote:

Black slavery was an institution founded solely on the abuse of power. In all aspects created by a barbarous and shortsighted politics, and maintained by violence…. It was done without pretext and without excuse. And only in the name of the right of the strongest.

(Cooper, 1925/1988:131)

And in a more concrete and journalistic style, Wells-Barnett wrote of lynching, “The more I studied the situation the more I was convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income” (Wells-Barnett, 1970:10). Race, then, is at the center of both women’s social theories; the power relations between whites and blacks in Western history and contemporary American society give them their paradigm of domination and of stratification. In this insistence that domination, inequality, and injustice are structurally pervasive in modern society, Cooper and Wells-Barnett differed from the white women sociologists of their day, all of whom, even the radical feminist Gilman, blurred the issue of domination in themes about evolution and progress.

Intersections: Race, Gender, Class
Using race relations as a lens on oppression and stratification, both Cooper and Wells-Barnett explored other social practices of stratification. Cooper analyzed gender inequality between white women and men and between African American women and men (1892/1969:9–149). And she explored the complex interplay of race and gender through her own embodied experience in society. She analyzed a moment when, traveling by train, she arrived at a shabby railway station and looked for a bathroom: “I see two dingy little rooms with ‘For Ladies’ swinging over one and ‘For Colored People’ over the other, while wondering under which head I come” (96). More generally, she wrote, “The colored woman today occupies … a unique position…. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both” (134).

Wells-Barnett looked at an even more explosive interaction of race and gender, exploring the interplay of those issues around sexuality. She dissolved the rationale for the lynching of black men offered by white society, the myth that the victim raped a white woman. She provided case studies of the emotional/sexual attraction between white women and black men as a normal part of social relations in the South and of the attraction of white men to black women. The former was so taboo a possibility that when it occurred, it was labeled rape and led to lynching. The latter was so condoned and unreprimanded, no matter how resisted by black women, that it resulted in “the many shades of the race.” Wells-Barnett’s Memphis newspaper was burned to the ground and her life threatened for opening up this topic in the 1890s.

Both women further expanded the theme of social inequality to class relations. Cooper described the relation between capitalists and labor (her terms) in modern society, the interpolation of class and race in both urban and rural America, the internal economic and status divisions in the African American population, the interaction of class and race in educated women’s circles, shade stratification in the societies of the Caribbean, and status differences among African American women. Wells-Barnett traced social class tensions in the women’s club movement of her day and in Great Britain, to which she traveled as part of her antilynching campaign. She also located some of the problems of lynching in the class/race nexus: “Lynching was an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus ‘keep the nigger down’” (Wells-Barnett, 1970:64). Finally, both women understood that domination, inequality, and race conflict were not only issues in the various nation-states of the West, but a process in the “global order” of capitalism. Wells-Barnett discussed the situation of Indians in Britain in the heyday of the British Empire. Cooper’s dissertation (1925/1988) focuses on the contradiction between black enslavement as an economic “resource” for eighteenth-century capitalist economies and the democratic aspiration of white, bourgeois revolutionists. Slavery gave the lie to the democratic revolutionary claims of the French (and supposedly the American) Revolution and resulted in the defeat of white lower- and working-class aspirations in those revolutions.

The Organization of Society

From this systematic grasp of domination and inequality, Cooper developed both a theory of social organization and an epistemology for her project of social critique. She saw society as a system—of institutions such as economy, family, education, and religion; of stratificational groupings resulting from class, race, and gender distinctions and from their parallel as well as overlapping dynamics; and of cultural
aspirations and themes. She gave serious attention to the cultural themes of masculinity and femininity and to the outcome of those themes for personality and for societal functioning. Order in this system could take two forms. It could result from domination and oppression, the situation in much of the contemporary world, or it could result from “equilibrium,” a dynamic and competitive interdependence between all sectors of a society. Her criterion for a critical evaluation of society was whether it was characterized by equilibrium or domination, not whether it was free of conflict.

Vantage Point and “the Singing Something”

Epistemologically, Cooper presented an argument that resonates with that of contemporary African American feminism. She inserts herself into sociological analysis by speaking from her distinctive vantage point as a black woman—the claim for which she is best known (E. Alexander, 1995; Giddings, 1984; Harley, 1978). “The ‘other side’ has not been represented by one who ‘lives there.’ And not many can more sensibly … tell the weight and the fret of the ‘long dull pain’ than the open-eyed but still voiceless Black woman” (Cooper, 1892/1969:i, ii, 31). This claim of vantage point is based in Cooper’s understanding of human nature, an understanding she shared with Wells-Barnett, which emphasizes above all the human being as possessed of “that Singing Something, which distinguished the first man from the last ape, which in a subtle way tagged him with the picturesque Greek title anthropos, the upward face” (Cooper, 1925/1998:293), that is, as a being whose species nature contains the possibility of rising in aspiration out of the most degrading and oppressive circumstances.
Marianne Schnitger Weber (1870–1954)

Marianne Weber is known in American sociology solely through her biography of her husband, *Max Weber: A Biography* (1926/1975; see Chapter 8). Her self-portrait there is of the dutiful, uncritical, self-effacing Victorian wife, hovering on the edge of the grand life and figure of Max Weber. Perhaps this depiction amused her, for it hides much of the truth of her life. She was among the first generation of German women formally admitted for university study (Roth, 1990:67). Her studies were in the general area of social science. After Max’s nervous breakdown in 1897 and his retreat to a semi-reclusive life, Marianne became the public figure in the marriage, building her reputation as a feminist scholar and public speaker. She published her first book on the relationship of Fichte and Marx in 1900, her first journal article “Politics and the Women’s Movement” in 1901, and over the next thirty-five years eight books and dozens of articles in sociology and on feminist issues. In 1918, German women won the vote, and in 1919, Marianne became the first female member of parliament for Baden. In 1920, the year of Max’s death, she was president of the Federation of German Women’s Organizations, Germany’s most powerful feminist organization. In 1924 she was granted an honorary doctorate in law by Heidelberg University “in recognition of her legal study and editorial work” (Kippenberg, 2005; Roth, 1990:66).

It is part of the gender politics of sociology that until recently none of Marianne Weber’s writings had been translated into English except her biography of Max, and we can glean only a few details of her sociological work from brief English discussions of her, which frequently lack an appropriate framing in feminist sociology (Britton, 1979; Hackett, 1976; Kandal, 1988; Roth, 1990, 2005; Scaff, 1988; J. Thomas, 1985; Tijssen, 1991; Whimster, 2005a; Wobbe, 2004). In 1998, the first essays from her 1919 collection *Reflections on Women and Women’s Issues* became available in English (see translation by Elizabeth Kirchen in Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998). From these materials, we can see that she wrote as a feminist social theorist who drew on and responded critically to the theories of Simmel, Max Weber, Marx and Engels, and feminist writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whom we discussed earlier in this chapter.

**The Stand Point of Women**

Marianne Weber’s social theory grounds an understanding of the fundamental organization of society in an understanding of the human being, and both of these are seen through her self-defined role as a feminist sociologist. She saw the human being, in the tradition of German Idealism, as an individual who wants to control his or her own destiny and to become all he or she is created capable of becoming. This gave her the critical lens through which she evaluated society: how well do social structures make such self-fulfillment a possibility for women as well as for men?

These understandings led Marianne Weber to her central theoretical project, the creation of a sociology from the standpoint of women. She claimed that there is a distinctive women’s standpoint. She partly defined this standpoint by contrasting women’s experiences and understandings with men’s—of marriage, public and household life, the importance of housework, power and other relational arrangements, ethics, and war. She developed three major themes around this central concern: the need for an autonomy for women equal to that
of men (a debate with Max), the significance of women’s work in the production of culture (a debate with Simmel), and the situated differences of standpoint among women (a debate partially with Gilman). Marianne Weber used legal research, historical data, and statistical data as empirical bases for her theoretical arguments.

**Gender and Power: Authority Is Autonomy**

In the work that established her as a leading feminist scholar, *Ehefrau und Mutter in der Rechtsentwicklung* (Marriage and Motherhood in the Development of Law; 1907), and her 1912 essay presenting a formal conceptualization of some of its major arguments, “Authority and Autonomy in Marriage,” Marianne Weber brought a woman-centered perspective to bear on Max Weber’s famous typology of power. For women, she argued, in their experiences of masculine domination within marriage, the key distinction is not between legitimate power (authority) and illegitimate power (coercion). Because all societies have framed marriage relations with law, all legal power relations between husband and wife are culturally legitimate. But over the long course of Western history, which she chronicles in detail, men have transformed law and culture in the direction of greater individual autonomy for themselves, greater possibilities for freedom in self-definition. The tension then may be construed not as one between coercion and authority but as one between autonomy and domination, between a free exercise of one’s will in action and subordinating one’s will to another. While men have changed law and culture to gain such autonomy, they have skillfully contrived to keep the family patriarchal, their “authority” perhaps softened a little but essentially intact; women continue to experience this relationship of male “authority” as one that denies them autonomous action and will. Weber explored legal, normative, and cultural changes that might lead to a transformation of marriage into one of a bond between independent actors, something she regarded as a difficult achievement (Marianne Weber, 1912/1919/1998). In her later book, *Women and Love* (1935), she explored conventional and unconventional ways in which women may find the love they typically seek through marriage—the latter include relationships between younger men and older women, between women, and the sublimated ideal of public service. All are alternatives to the structure of conventional marriage.

**Gender and Culture: Objective Culture, Personal Culture, and the “Middle Ground of Daily Life”**

Continuing her exploration of structural conditions for autonomy, Marianne rebutted Georg Simmel’s (Chapter 9) sociology of gender in which he idealized women’s distinct and spiritual nature and suggested the existence of two distinctive spheres of culture: the “objective” or male world of public achievement and the “personal” or female world of inner self development (G. Oakes, 1984; Tijssen, 1991). Weber pointed out that there is much about women’s work in the household that is not spiritual but intensely practical, instrumental, and objective. She suggested that women’s work in the home constitutes a third realm of culture production, which she called the “middle ground of immediate daily life,” in which the individual person is constructed and reproduced as a social being capable of sympathetic and intelligent responses to others. She questioned Simmel’s assumption of distinctively male and female natures, arguing that although one can discern some typical differences between the two genders, individuals within each gender vary too much to support the
assumption of separate natures. She concluded that it is more useful to think of a common nature and of typical maleness and femaleness as circles intersecting within the common space. This idea allows one to think of women developing their autonomy more fully, men their capacities for caring, and individuals of each gender moving as freely between public and private culture as they individually choose (Marianne Weber, 1918–1919/1998).

Differences Among Women

But Weber also noticed differences among women in standpoint because of social-class stratification. This theme was developed in “Jobs and Marriage” (1905/1919) and “The Valuation of Housework” (1912/1919b), in which she grounded her theory of women’s standpoint in her sociological understanding of societal organization, social class stratification, and the data of the German census. She contrasted the life experiences of women in agricultural work, paid domestic employment, factory work, and professional employment. She pointed out that much of women’s “professional” work was relatively low status (61 percent of this category were midwives). Only a small fraction (2 percent) of professional women in Germany held the high-status, self-actualizing jobs that she saw the women’s movement depicting as the ideal for women’s workplace participation. Yet the standpoint of the spokespersons of this movement was in this tiny privileged group. Weber argued that it was absurd to speak from this standpoint about the reforms needed in all women’s home and work lives. She chided her “American sister in struggle” Gilman for succumbing to this totalizing error.

The interaction of capitalism and patriarchy creates barriers to the attempts of women, especially non-elite women, to seek greater liberty and autonomy. Capitalistic work arrangements doom most women to wage-sector work that is typically exhausting, onerous, and grossly underpaid—and an experience of meaninglessness and alienation. Indeed, most working women have not chosen to work outside the home but have been forced by capitalistic and class pressures to seek wages, however small. Working women bear the double burden of wage-work demands and unaltered expectations that they are fully responsible for child care and housework. Under these conditions, working-class women’s lives are little improved by wage-sector involvement. Nor did Weber romanticize the home situations of women as an alternative to wage work. She saw that housework for most women is an area of incessant drudgery, that women who stay at home, whatever their class, are oppressed by economic dependency and by patriarchal male authority.

Social Change

Only fundamental reform holds any hope for women’s escape from these two sites of oppression. Weber discussed legal reforms such as spousal rights, job training for women as a route to better employment and more meaningful lives, and, most radical of all, various formulas that would provide monetary independence for the housewife.

She saw that capitalism could perhaps offer some emancipation for women in its acceleration of individualism and its erosion of ancient relational patterns like patriarchy (J. Thomas, 1985). But her position was that to improve women’s situation, one should begin by reforming the patriarchal household rather than the capitalistic workplace. A reformed, that is, nonpatriarchal household, was one setting in which women could
find vocation and self-actualization. Weber’s acute consciousness of women’s varied vantage points, however, led her also to recommend the pursuit of a public career, either paid or voluntary, as another avenue to self-actualization for some women.

The exploration of Marianne Weber’s theory is currently under way. What is apparent is that she is a significant contributor to an international effort by women sociologists to create a feminist sociological theory in the classic period of sociology’s history.
Beatrice Potter Webb (1858–1943)

Beatrice Potter Webb was an amalgam of contradictions—a woman born to extreme wealth, she was nevertheless “self-made”; a member of the British upper class, she devoted herself as a sociologist and theorist to the problems of “poverty amidst riches” (1926:209); a student and lifelong friend of Herbert Spencer, she became a leading British socialist; a solid empiricist, she was nevertheless moved to her descriptive and analytic studies by what she called “a consciousness of sin” (167). Webb’s father, Richard Potter, was a wealthy industrialist who made his living in railroad speculation; her mother, Laurencina, was a close friend of Spencer, a frequent visitor to the Potter household. Webb grew to maturity just before women began to be admitted to British universities and was largely self-educated through reading, travels with her father, conversation with Spencer, and reflection in her voluminous personal diaries. Two paths were primarily open to her as a member of her class, generation, and gender—a “suitable” marriage or good works; she chose neither. She chose instead to become what she described as “a female brain worker” (in contrast to a manual worker), a social investigator; the problems she focused on were economic inequality, the causes of poverty, and ways to reform the capitalist economy. The marriage she eventually made, to Sidney Webb, a British Fabian socialist, considered “unsuitable” by her family, was an intellectual and political partnership that produced a policy-oriented body of empirical research foundational to the twentieth-century British welfare state.

In her autobiography, My Apprenticeship (1926), Webb explored the motivations that led her to social research: “Why did I select the chronic destitution of whole sections of the people, whether illustrated by overcrowded homes, by demoralized casual labor at the docks, or by the low wages, long hours, and insanitary conditions of the sweated industries, as the first subject for enquiry?” (1926:167). She admits that she was not moved by charity but by an unease affecting much of the class of wealthy British capitalists to which her family belonged as they confronted the fact that four-fifths of the population of Britain had not benefited from the Industrial Revolution and were indeed the worse off for it. Her intellectual curiosity was a response to debates about whether the misery of the many must be a necessary condition for the wealth and advancement of the few and whether the poor are responsible for their poverty or are the victims of larger social forces. This question guided her evaluation of how just contemporary society is.

Method: Natural Experiments

Seeking to understand the causes of poverty, Webb first worked as “a charity visitor,” but her interest was not in good works but in understanding. She moved from this charity work to assisting Charles Booth in his seventeen-volume study, The Life and Labour of the People of London (1892–1902). Her experiences working with the poor and with Booth led her to the insight that the best way to understand how to reform the capitalist economic system was not to study the desperately poor but to find examples of working-class people successfully organizing to create alternative economic systems. She argued that in real social life, “experiments” of this type were taking place all the time in businesses, collectives, and local government. The presence of these social experiments suggests both Webb’s understanding of human beings as a species with the potential
for collective creativity and her sense of social organization as changing in response to material production. This line of thought culminated in her most important single-authored monograph, *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain* (1891). In this study, which she did as participant observation research in Lancastershire, Webb outlined how economic equity could be arrived at through democratic decision making by showing how a British working-class buyers’ co-operative functioned, that is, how working people could combine their purchasing power to control the price and quality—and potentially, the conditions of production—of material goods and services.

**Social Change: Permeation**

This research led Webb to an interest in Fabian Socialism and her acquaintance with Sidney Webb. The Fabian Socialists, a relatively small party, sought to influence the course of reform in Britain by a process of “permeation,” that is, by supplying information and platform planks to any political party that would champion any aspect of the reform of inequality. The Webbs as Fabians were guided by three main principles: (1) that Marx is wrong in his prediction of the “withering away of the state”; rather the state must intervene in order to control—or socialize—basic elements of the economy; (2) inequality has advanced to such a point of social crisis that such intervention is inevitable; and (3) therefore, it is possible for socialists to advocate gradual rather than revolutionary reforms because gradualism is inevitable.

Webb’s vision of society was, above all, of the working out of processes between the structures in which people are contained—structures such as state, class, trade unions, and sweatshops. The key structures she concentrated on are the state and social classes. The key process she believed she was witnessing in her lifetime is the growth of state intervention in the conduct of the economy and the society. She accounted for this growth in intervention by the fact that in her lifetime, conditions of inequality in Great Britain and the world were reaching a point where there was no choice but for state intervention. What Webb saw as the great social change of her day is that “our actions whether legislative or voluntary, individual or collective, are becoming more and more inspired and guided by descriptions of our social state” ([1887] 1926:403), that is, that actions increasingly are taken on the basis of information about society. She pointed to the vast increase in the interventions of government in the conduct of the economy as her prime proof.

**The Social Role of the Sociologist**

Webb thought that if reforms are to work, it is of critical importance that information be accurate, and she devoted much of her sociology to detailed explanations of how to do both quantitative and qualitative empirical research. She saw the primary role of the sociologist as providers of the information on which a reformist state could be established and make policy. With Sidney, she wrote eight major books encompassing some 4,000 pages; the direction of this work is what we may term “a critical empiricism”; that is, it is quantitative and qualitative research done with a view toward social change.

With few exceptions, Webb’s sociological significance has not received the attention it deserves (Castillo and Castillo, 2004). One reason for Webb’s relative neglect as a sociologist may lie in feminist sociologists’ reaction to her antisuffrage stance in the 1880s and 1890s. Although Webb later claimed that she was sorry
almost immediately after signing an antisuffrage petition, she did not publicly recant for twenty years; she gave her essential reason for her stance as “I had never myself suffered the disabilities assumed to arise from my sex” (1926:343). Yet this assertion is shown as decidedly untrue in various incidents in My Apprenticeship. What is more likely the case is that Webb could not see herself as a member of a subordinate class, in this case, women, though she would work all her life to help the subordinated.
Summary

The history of the development of sociological theory in the classic period 1830–1930 is typically a description of the work of male theorists. A complex gender politics in academic life, in sociology, in intellectual productivity, and in historiography explains the absence of women from these histories. As part of the contemporary feminist project of deconstructing this politics and of affirming women’s contribution to the world of intellectual achievement, this chapter introduces the ideas of several women to the record, and hopefully the canon, of sociology’s theoretical development. Harriet Martineau is restored to her rightful place in sociology’s founding generation, and a selection of theorists, including Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams and her network of women sociologists, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells-Barnett, Marianne Schnitger Weber, and Beatrice Potter Webb, are discussed as contributors to sociology's classic period of theoretical development, from 1890 to 1930.

Each of these women had that “systematic consciousness of society and social relations” that is the hallmark of a sociological theorist. And although each woman’s theory is distinctively framed by the intellectual and social influences of her biography and by her theoretical and ethical preferences, all these theories are also patterned by some common themes: awareness of the fact that they spoke from the particular vantage point of women, an analysis and ethical concern with society’s power arrangements, and a commitment to sound research as a necessary means to social amelioration and change. Each woman’s theory can thus be understood and evaluated as a distinctive individual contribution to sociology. But taken together, these women can also be rediscovered as the collectivity who introduced a feminist theoretical tradition into the history of the discipline.
Notes

1. The phrase “to treat of philosophical principles, abstract and applied, of sociology” (italics added) is from two letters from Harriet Martineau to her brother James, December 12 and 21, 1837 (as cited in Hoecker-Drysdale, 1994:77). Although Comte is conventionally seen as inventing the word sociology, Martineau’s use here shows that the term had general currency in the 1830s and that her usage, together with Comte’s, may reflect some emerging consensus about the name for the new field.

2. Our discussion also draws on initial aid in translation by C. Joanna Sheldon of Ithaca, New York, to whom we express our deepest appreciation for her help.
Many thanks to Professor Norman R. Yetman, University of Kansas, for his many insightful suggestions and comments on this chapter.
Chapter Outline

Intellectual Influences
Studying Race Scientifically: *The Philadelphia Negro*
Theoretical Contributions
Economics
Karl Marx, Socialism, and Communism
Contemporary Applications

Not too many years ago, one would have been unlikely to see a chapter on W. E. B. Du Bois in a book devoted to classical sociological theory (Rabaka, 2006, 2007). Du Bois’s work tends to lack references to, and is not clearly embedded in, the theoretical traditions that are part of, and that inform, this book. He is best known in sociology for his empirical study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Du Bois, 1899/1996; Lemert, 2005), a work that is not only highly descriptive but devoid of what is usually thought of as theory. Furthermore, the bulk of Du Bois’s enormous body of work produced over many years takes a variety of other forms, including autobiography, poetry, essays, short stories, political commentary, book reviews, newspaper articles, and editorials. In many of his best-known works, he placed great emphasis on the aesthetics of what he wrote—how he said things seemed at times to be at least as important as what he said. Most important, he was an activist and he had a profound effect on the state of black persons and others (e.g., women) in society. Nevertheless, he certainly was influential within sociology, and if anything, that influence has increased, but he influenced many other disciplines as well.

Du Bois’s ideas meet our definition of sociological theory: they have a wide range of application, especially to issues involving minority groups; they deal with the important issue of race; they have stood the test of time; indeed, they have greater scholarly impact today than they did during Du Bois’s lifetime. He was a sociologist and his ideas are defined as important within that field (and many others). As recent scholars have pointed out, in 1897 Du Bois started to develop the first American school of scientific sociology at Atlanta University (A. Morris, 2015; Wright, 2002). This challenges the conventional view that the University of Chicago is the birthplace of scientific sociology in America. Moreover, even though Du Bois’s work was largely ignored by the founders of American sociology, Max Weber, having met and corresponded with Du Bois, viewed him as a great American sociologist (A. Morris, 2015). Weber’s views on race were significantly shaped by his engagement with Du Bois’s scholarship and he invited Du Bois to publish an essay on race and class for the German journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*.

One of the reasons that Du Bois’s work has grown in prominence is because his ideas have much in common with contemporary feminist theories and multicultural theories. The standpoint from which he theorized was that of black Americans. Like the thinking of many feminists, and especially multiculturalists, his theorizing often did not take the conventional modern form (heavy, theoretical tomes), but a range of theoretical ideas is embedded in his empirical studies, autobiographical writings, essays, poems, and other works. As a result of recent developments, our sense of what constitutes theory has expanded greatly. It no longer has to be written in a certain way by people trained to do theory in that way. We now see that theory can come in various forms.
and be written in ways that we do not necessarily recognize immediately as theory. To allow theory to move beyond the traditional canon of the “dead white men” dealt with throughout most of this book, we need to have the kind of revised vision of theory offered by the viewpoints that have emerged in the past several decades.

This said, we should not overdo Du Bois’s similarities to contemporary theorists. He was a scholar of his time and adopted the methods of positivism and historical sociology. He rigorously applied these approaches to topics that had been excluded from the core of the emerging discipline: race and colonialism. Weber, as noted earlier, was interested in race, and Durkheim commented on race especially in the context of the anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus affair (see chapter 7). In Capital, Marx addressed the importance of colonialism and, in particular, the process of “primitive accumulation” for the formation of capitalism. However, none of these founding figures treated race as a central problem for sociology. In those cases where race was central to sociological thought, it was introduced in the form of scientific racism: Social Darwinism (A. Morris, 2015). Many prominent American sociologists held the view that white civilization was, for evolutionary reasons, naturally superior to black civilization. Social Darwinism, Du Bois argued, was not a scientific theory. It was not based on empirical evidence but was accepted for social and political reasons: it justified the white supremacy that pervaded American society. The point, though, is that Du Bois viewed race not as a subtopic for sociological theory and research but as a problem of interest to black Americans and policy makers. When Du Bois famously claimed that the color-line is the problem of the twentieth century, he meant that race was a central and constituting feature of the modern social world. Recent theories of colonialism and race demonstrate that Du Bois was correct in this view (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015). In the broadest sense, the lesson that we can take from Du Bois is that along with class, the division of labor, rationalization, self, and gender, the concept of race must be central to any theory of modern society.
Intellectual Influences

According to Paul Taylor (2011), Du Bois’s sociology was shaped by many methods and theoretical traditions, most notably pragmatism, positivism, and Marxism. We can add to that the impact of German historicism and romanticism (Appiah, 2014). Du Bois’s pragmatism comes through the time that he spent studying with American philosophers Josiah Royce, George Santayana, and William James. These scholars emphasized the idea that theory is true only insofar as it impacts the world. This conception of theory clearly shaped Du Bois’s approach to sociology, which always sought to change the world (for more on pragmatism, see Chapter 15).

The positivist, historical, and romantic elements of Du Bois’s thought came through his two years of study in Germany. There Du Bois studied with important scholars in nineteenth-century history and economics: Gustav von Schmoller, Heinrich von Treitschke, and Wilhelm Dilthey. Only a few years earlier, these men had been Weber’s teachers. Also, though Du Bois had been exposed to Marxist and socialist ideas in Germany, his turn to Marxism did not come until later in life. It developed as Du Bois grew skeptical of the ability of scientific research to influence American views on race.

Science

In America Du Bois had already been attracted to the scientific method. As a student at Harvard, Du Bois described how the influence of some of his professors turned me back from the lonely but sterile land of philosophic speculation, to the social sciences as the field for gathering and interpreting that body of fact which would apply to my program for the Negro…. In other words, I was trying to make my first steps toward sociology as the science of human action. It goes without saying that no such field of study was then recognized at Harvard or came to be recognized for 20 years after. (1968:148)

During his days in Germany, he turned even more resolutely in the direction of positivism (although he was well aware of the difficulties associated with it): “I … began to grasp the idea of a world of human beings whose actions, like those of the physical world, were subject to law” (Du Bois, 1968:205). Indeed, Du Bois thought of much of his early work (through 1910) as kind of laboratory experiments on the “Negro Problem” in which he “hoped to make the laws of social living clearer, surer, and more definite” (1968:216).3 In Germany, Du Bois was exposed to a methodological rigor that was not present in America at the time. When Du Bois returned to the United States he could claim to be one of the few sociologists to have a thorough knowledge of quantitative analysis and statistical methods (A. Morris, 2015:21).

This said, Du Bois’s view of science was different from the kind of science typically associated with the term positivism. He did not believe that sociology should model itself on the natural sciences nor did he believe that sociologists could discover invariant laws of social life. As is made clear by his political activism, Du Bois also did not believe that social life is determined by preestablished laws of cause and effect. Rather he persistently
emphasized that human beings are agents who can change the social world. Describing this nuanced approach, Du Bois wrote,

the study of society as it is carried on today is a slow and difficult task. No sociologist claims to present in his science any such finished system of laws and measurement as chemistry or astronomy – it is rather a great field of study where careful observers are daily counting, measuring and searching – gathering data which another age will systematize and interpret…. It [sociology] has discovered no great or startling laws of human action and may never do so – but it has collected a mass of material of supreme interest and value, and of such a nature that no modern thinker who is interested in the condition and destiny of beings can afford to ignore its methods and results. (Cited in A. Morris, 2015:28)

Instead of the discovery of invariant laws, Du Bois took from positivism the emphasis on “value-free” research (for more on this, see Chapter 8 on Weber) and the utility of quantitative analysis. This approach is most evident in Du Bois’s study *The Philadelphia Negro* and in the many research projects that he undertook as the leader of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory (Wright, 2002). In the *Philadelphia Negro* he tried hard to let the data, and to a lesser degree the people, speak for themselves. His own “voice” is quite muted and dispassionate. Although he was critical of white America for what it was doing to black Americans, he was equally hard on the latter, making it clear that they bore some of the responsibility for their plight.

However, *The Philadelphia Negro*, published early in Du Bois’s career, proved to be very different from the vast majority of the work that he did over the succeeding half century and more. For example, although he continued to point an accusatory finger at black Americans, at least for a time, he ultimately came to focus almost all his attention on, and anger at, white America and what it was doing to black Americans. Eventually, he took a broader focus and critically analyzed the world as a whole, focusing on the prejudice and discrimination of whites against the “darker” races—black, brown, yellow, and so on. He wrote about these issues with increasingly great passion and anger—this work was anything but value-free. Nevertheless, he continued to argue for the dispassionate, scientific study of race relations, even though he was less and less inclined to do such studies himself.

**German Historicism and Romanticism**

In Germany, Du Bois was exposed to another tradition of social thought that had an equally important impact on his work. Whereas *The Philadelphia Negro* is representative of Du Bois’s scientific commitments, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published four years later in 1903, represents the poetic, romantic, and historically minded Du Bois. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2014:79) referred to these two different scholarly approaches as Du Bois’s “disciplinary schizophrenia.” Though *The Souls of Black Folk* includes numerical information, this is overshadowed by Du Bois’s autobiographical accounts of racism, his analysis of black cultural forms, and his study of black historical figures. In this book Du Bois relied on the evocative description of personal and shared experiences. To put it in more contemporary terms, the goal was to describe the black historical experience. Appiah (2014) argued that this approach was strongly influenced by certain aspects of German
romantic philosophy.

For example, Du Bois's ideas about race and nationalism had much in common with the German scholar Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder argued that each nation, or race, has a distinct shared spirit, its *Volksgeist*. When Du Bois talked about the *souls* of black folk, Appiah (2014) believes that he had the concept of *Volksgeist* in mind. Du Bois argued that each nation or race has a unique spirit, which emerges in cultural expressions. Herder paid particular attention to folk songs. Du Bois's sympathy for this idea is captured in the fact that each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* is introduced through a musical bar from the Negro Spirituals, what Du Bois referred to as the Sorrow Songs. Du Bois believed that the Sorrow Songs expressed something unique about black historical experience and that they demanded sociological attention. It is important to point out that Du Bois did not introduce the Sorrow Songs and other forms of black cultural expression as more data for scientific analysis. The introduction and reflection on these songs were a way of doing sociology quite distinct from the scientific approach. Like the method of *verstehen* (see Weber, Chapter 8), this was a kind of sociology that used cultural expressions to deepen our understanding of a people's experience of the world.

Appiah also has found in Du Bois a connection to the romantic concept of "struggle," particularly in the opening essay of *The Souls of Black Folk*: “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” In the work of German philosopher Johann Fichte, struggle is “the process in which self overcomes the resistance of the outer world” (Appiah, 2014:55). Romantic individuals tried to overcome their selves by reaching beyond the limits of the immediate world to achieve wholeness and unity with larger cosmic and social forces. These romantic ideas gain additional depth when applied to the lives of black Americans and persons of color. There, the struggle is not only a personal spiritual quest but also an effort to transform society so that it recognizes black identity as a unique thing in itself. Struggle is not only struggle within the self but also struggle against a world that denies the selves of racialized persons. In all, Du Bois viewed struggle as both a collective and an individual problem. The soul of the individual is tied to the collective soul of the culture into which he or she is born. An important part of Du Bois's sociological work, then, was developing the kind of scholarship that cleared space for the cultural expressions of black people and people of color more generally.

The “New” Social Theory and Marxism

Du Bois’s early commitment to science and even romantic cultural struggle were rooted in a commitment to the grand aspirations of modernity. Along with his contemporaries, Du Bois believed that the goal of modern science was to contribute to human progress and betterment. This hopeful aspiration motivated much of Du Bois’s early work. For example, he was drawn to the scientific method because he believed that it could provide a well-grounded and factual criticism of American racism and Social Darwinist philosophies. At the time, Du Bois believed that “the world was thinking wrong about race because it didn’t know” (Du Bois, cited in P. Taylor, 2011:437). He also believed that books like *The Souls of Black Folk* would lead to a greater appreciation of black cultural forms and the unique contributions that they could make to American culture. Despite these efforts, Du Bois’s message went unheard and he became increasingly skeptical of the scientific approach and the efficacy of academic work in itself. A full understanding of the power relationships that
limited scientific influence required a deeper and more expansive approach to scholarship than is provided by conventional sociological approaches.

A component of that alternative is found in books like The Souls of Black Folk. With its reliance on autobiographical material and other nonconventional materials, The Souls of Black Folk pushed the limits of accepted forms of scholarship. This is why Du Bois is often compared to contemporary feminist theorists, postmodern theorists, and multicultural theorists of identity. All of these perspectives are skeptical of the conventional canon of sociological thought. They are critical of strictly scientific approaches and argue that sociological inquiry must include nonconventional forms of study. For example, with his autobiographical writings Du Bois developed an early version of the standpoint theories espoused and created by feminists and theorists of race (e.g., P. Collins, 1990, 1998). Like standpoint theorists, Du Bois was critical of the value-free perspective, the “view from nowhere,” the “god’s eye” view, espoused by modernists. Standpoint theorists argue that this kind of neutral disengagement from the world is impossible—one can never be value-free, be nowhere, adopt a godlike perspective. In fact, standpoint theorists argue that the “neutrality” claimed by science is oftentimes a pose or an ideological cover that allows seemingly scientific social scientists (and others) to adopt ideas that adversely affect minorities, be they women, gays, or blacks, among others. These social theorists argue for the need to recognize this and to develop theories that self-consciously looked at the social world from the standpoint of such minority groups.

Du Bois can be seen, especially after The Philadelphia Negro and his other early scientific works, to be offering a view of society from the standpoint of black Americans and more generally of the world from the perspective of all racialized persons. At the minimum, being black gives observers the ability to see things whites cannot see: “We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot” (Du Bois, 1926/1995a:509). More specifically, in a famous essay, “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois (1920:29) argued that his standpoint as a black American gave him special insight into white Americans:

Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler…. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know … I see them stripped,—ugly, human.

Late twentieth-century thinkers who adopted the standpoint of black Americans saw Du Bois as a pioneer in this kind of work, and feminists, queer theorists, and others also applauded and resonated with his efforts.

In one further development later in life, Du Bois turned to economic theories of society and in particular Marxist critiques of capitalism and colonialism. Du Bois, as we have seen, tried many different scholarly and political approaches to critiquing and overcoming the racism of the color-line. But even with his science, his romanticism, and his involvement in political life, change was slow in coming. White America persistently rejected his critiques of American racism. Du Bois’s turn to Marxism, then, was motivated by an attempt to provide an even deeper explanation of resistance to scientifically informed studies of race. Though we return
to the theory later in this chapter, in short, Du Bois explained that racism developed and persisted in America
and around the world because it served the interests of capitalism. Racism is an ideology that divides the
working class (proletariat) against itself to the benefit of the owning classes (bourgeoisie). As such, the critique
of the color-line also must include a critique of the way in which capitalism organizes the world.
Studying Race Scientifically: *The Philadelphia Negro*

Although it is not a work in theory (“Of the theory back of the plan of this study of Negroes I neither knew nor cared” [Du Bois, 1968:197]), and it was not typical of the vast bulk of Du Bois’s work, it is necessary to discuss, at least briefly, his pioneering study of the seventh ward in Philadelphia. Important in itself, it also helps us to understand the later development of Du Bois’s thinking. Elijah Anderson (1999), who did his own study of the same ward almost a hundred years later, regarded *The Philadelphia Negro* as a “masterpiece.” “One of the first works to combine the use of urban ethnography, social history, and descriptive statistics, it has become a classic work in the social science literature” (E. Anderson, 1996:ix). In its use of multiple methods, and in its many, very contemporary sounding conclusions about black Americans and race relations, it is a book that has aged well and stands up in comparison to the widely acknowledged classics of this genre.
W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biographical Sketch

C.M. Battey/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts (D. Lewis, 1993). Compared to the vast majority of blacks of his day, Du Bois had a comparatively advantaged upbringing that led to college at Fisk University and later to a Ph.D. from Harvard University, with a stop along the way at the University of Berlin. Despite earning the Ph.D. from Harvard, Du Bois viewed his two years in Germany as the most important educational experience of his life. In Germany, he felt free from the stigma and discrimination of American race relations for the first time in his life. He learned to speak German, came to frequently quote German poetry, and had a love affair. He came to view himself as a man of destiny, caught up in the “development of the world” with plans to “raise his race” (Du Bois, quoted in D. Lewis 1993:135).

Du Bois took his first job teaching Greek and Latin at a black college (Wilberforce). He noted that “the institution would have no sociology, even though I offered to teach it on my own time” (Du Bois, 1968:189). Du Bois moved on in the fall of 1896 when he was offered a position as assistant instructor at the University of Pennsylvania to do research on blacks in Philadelphia. That research led to the publication of one of the classic works of early sociology, The Philadelphia Negro (1899/1996). When that project was completed, Du Bois moved (he never had a regular faculty position at Pennsylvania and that, like many other things in his lifetime, rankled him) to Atlanta University, where he taught sociology from 1897 to 1910 and played a leadership role in the development of the Sociological Laboratory at Atlanta University (A. Morris, 2015; Wright, 2002). In Atlanta, Du Bois also took leadership of the annual Atlanta University Conference. This series of meetings brought together researchers to study and publish numerous reports on the black urban experience. Ultimately, this broad set of activities laid the foundation for what Aldon Morris has called the Du Bois-Atlanta school of sociology. Using a wide array of sociological methods, the Du Bois-Atlanta school took as its focus black urban life and argued that “sociological and economic factors were … the main causes of racial inequality that relegated black people
to the bottom of the social order” (A. Morris, 2015:58).

It was also in this period that he authored the first and most important of his autobiographical memoirs, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1996). This was a highly literary and deeply personal work that also made a series of general theoretical points and contributed greatly to the understanding of black Americans and of race relations. Du Bois published a number of such autobiographical works during the course of his life, including *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920/1999), *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940/2007), and *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968). Of *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois (1968:2) wrote, “I have written then what is meant to be not so much my autobiography as the autobiography of a concept of race, elucidated, magnified and doubtless distorted in the thoughts and deeds that were mine.” While at Atlanta University, Du Bois became more publicly and politically engaged. In 1905 he called for and attended a meeting near Buffalo, New York, that led to the formation of the Niagara Movement, an interracial civil rights organization interested in such things as the “abolition of all caste distinctions based simply on race and color” (Du Bois, 1968:249). This formed the basis of the similarly interracial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which came into existence in 1910, and Du Bois became its director of publications and research. He founded the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*, and in its pages authored many essays on a wide range of issues relating to the state of black people in America. Du Bois took this new position because it offered him a platform for the widespread dissemination of his ideas (he was solely responsible for the editorial opinions of *The Crisis*). In addition, his position at Atlanta University had become untenable because of his conflict with the then very popular and powerful Booker T. Washington, who was regarded by most white leaders and politicians as the spokesman for black America. Du Bois came to view Washington as far too conservative and much too willing to subordinate black Americans to whites in general and specifically within the white-dominated economy where they were to be trained for, and satisfied with, manual work.

For the next half century, Du Bois was a tireless writer and activist on behalf of African American and other racial causes (D. Lewis, 2000). He attended and participated in meetings, throughout the United States and much of the world, on black Americans in particular and all “colored” races in general. He took positions on many of the pressing issues of the day, almost always from the vantage point of black Americans and other minorities. For example, he had views on which presidential candidates black Americans should support, whether the United States should enter World Wars I and II, and whether black Americans should support those wars and participate in them.

By the early 1930s, the Depression had begun to wreak havoc on the circulation of *The Crisis* and Du Bois lost control to young dissidents within the NAACP. He returned to Atlanta University, to scholarly work, and among other things authored *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935/1998). His tenure lasted a little more than a decade, and in 1944 Du Bois (then 76) was forcibly retired by the university. Under pressure, the NAACP invited him back as an ornamental figure, but Du Bois refused to play that role or to act his age, and he was dismissed in 1948. His ideas and his work grew increasingly radical over the ensuing nearly two decades of his life. He joined and participated in various peace organizations and eventually was indicted by a grand jury in 1951 for failing to register as an agent of a foreign power in the peace movement.

Early in his life, Du Bois had hope in America in general and, more specifically, that it could solve its racial problems peacefully within the context of a capitalist society. Over the years he lost faith in capitalists and capitalism and grew more supportive of socialism. Eventually, he grew more radical in his views and drifted toward communism. He was quite impressed with the advances communism brought to the Soviet Union and China. In the end, he joined the Communist Party. Toward the very end of his long life, Du Bois seemed to give up hope in the United States, and he moved to the African nation of Ghana. Du Bois died there—a citizen of Ghana—on August 27, 1963, ironically the day before the March on Washington. He was 95 years of age.

Although wide-scale recognition of Du Bois as an important theorist may be relatively recent, he has long been influential within the black community. For example, on becoming chairman of the board of the NAACP, Julian Bond said, “I think for people of my age and generation, this [a picture in his home of a young Bond holding Du Bois’s hand] was a normal experience—not to have Du Bois in your home, but to have his name in your home, to know about him in your home…. This was table conversation for us” (cited in Lemert, 2000:346).

Several things stand out about this piece of work. First, Du Bois did it all on his own fieldwork, he had no research assistant to help him collect the wide array of data amassed in the study. He walked the streets of the seventh ward, observing, mapping, asking questions, and doing more formal interviews. Second, his inquiries
focused on topics that a similar study done today would also concern itself with, including the demographic characteristics of African Americans in this area of Philadelphia, the geographic origins of this population, marriage and the family, education (and illiteracy), work, the church, housing and community, and politics and voting. In addition to covering most of what we would today call social structures and social institutions, Du Bois also examined key contemporary social problems such as illiteracy, crime, and racial prejudice and discrimination. Any contemporary study of this type would need to cover these topics, and those that Du Bois did not concern himself with probably did not exist at the time. For example, E. Anderson (1999) rightly pointed to the enormous problems associated with drug use in the seventh ward in Philadelphia today, but drug abuse was virtually absent at the close of the nineteenth century in that area (or virtually anywhere else).

*The Philadelphia Negro* is a largely descriptive study; it is not overtly shaped by any theoretical perspective, nor does it come to any broad theoretical conclusion. Du Bois began by describing the history of the Negro in Philadelphia that led up to the point of his study—the late nineteenth century. After examining the history from 1638 to the time of his writing, especially the period following the end of the Civil War, Du Bois concluded that developments had been disappointing: “an abnormal and growing amount of crime and poverty can justly be charged to the Negro; he is not a large taxpayer, holds no conspicuous place in the business world or the world of letters, and even as a working man seems to be losing ground” (1899/1996:43).

Du Bois showed a very contemporary sense of important issues in the social sciences, especially time, space, and their intersection. Time is represented through his historical analysis, whereas his spatial orientation is reflected in his detailed analysis of the geography (social ecology) of the seventh ward. One of the things that becomes clear quickly is that seventh ward is not uniform; there is great diversity, from subarea to subarea, even block to block. In particular, Du Bois made it clear that there were important social class distinctions in the area, and the issue of social class is an important element throughout Du Bois's work (see later in this chapter), although it is increasingly subordinated to race, which is, by far, the most important factor in his studies and analyses.

One of the things that strikes today's reader is the multifaceted character of Du Bois's analysis; he saw virtually everything in multifactorial terms. A good example is found in the realm of the occupations held by black people and the incomes derived from that work. He accounted for their relatively lowly status on both dimensions in terms of (1) their lack of previous training, leading to low work-related efficiency; (2) the competition from others, especially white immigrants, who are seen as "eager," "well-trained," and "ruthless;" (3) industrial changes leading to the replacement of small businesses by increasingly large industries for whose work African Americans were ill-prepared; and (4) wide-ranging discrimination against African Americans on the basis of race. The latter reinforces itself because, as a result of discrimination, whites rarely come into contact with black people on the job, and this lack of contact serves to reinforce the prejudice that lies at the base of discrimination.

Although most of the blame, explicitly and implicitly, is placed on whites and their prejudice and discrimination, African Americans do not escape unscathed. On the one side, Du Bois argued that when African Americans seek to advance economically, “almost unconsciously the whole countenance and aid of the
community is thrown against the Negro” (1899/1996:121). On the other side, Du Bois described the ways in which African Americans contribute to their own economic difficulties. For example, he argued that they tend to go to white physicians and lawyers, thereby having an adverse effect on the small numbers of African Americans who make it into these occupations, as well as on the motivation of others to make the effort.

**Crime**

One of the most impressive aspects of *The Philadelphia Negro* is its analysis of the high crime rates among African Americans. Du Bois showed a very contemporary caution about earlier statistics showing a higher crime rate for Negroes. For example, he demonstrated the role played by discrimination in these statistics, arguing that Negroes were “arrested for less cause and given longer sentences than whites” (Du Bois, 1899/1996:239). He also made the point that many of the African Americans arrested were never brought to trial, with the result that their guilt or innocence was never proven.

Du Bois was careful to analyze the social causes of high crime rates among African Americans after the close of the Civil War. Among the factors that he pointed to is the heritage of slavery and emancipation, the influx of larger numbers of African Americans (and others) into the city, increasing competition for jobs, the increasing complexity of life, and the environment, including “the world of custom and thought in which he (the Negro) must live and work, the physical surrounding of house and home and ward, the moral encouragements and discouragements which he encounters” (Du Bois, 1899/1996:284). Turning to causes within the white community, Du Bois pointed to the “stinging oppression and ridicule” (241) heaped on blacks. He concluded, “The real foundation of the difference (of the social conditions facing Negroes) is the widespread feeling all over the land … that the Negro is something less than an American and ought not to be much more than he is” (284). He also concluded that crime is a “symptom of countless wrong social conditions” (242).

Although Du Bois found that whites are in general “quite unconscious of any such powerful and vindictive feeling,” blacks “regard this prejudice as the chief cause of their present unfortunate condition” (1899/1996:322). Here, Du Bois isolated an important difference between the races that continues to this day and, if possible, the differences in perception have increased. Nonetheless, Du Bois refuses to make a simplistic association between prejudice (and discrimination) and crime (as well as other problems confronting Negroes). He saw the linkages as both subtler and more dangerous.

Ironically, Du Bois found that the city of Philadelphia, through its institutions, charities, and sympathy, had supported “the criminal, the lazy and the shiftless,” but the city was found to have “no use” for “the educated and industrious young colored man” (1899/1996:352).

**Social Inequality: Caste and Class**

Although Du Bois certainly privileged race as a factor in this analysis, and he steadfastly retained such a focus throughout his long career, he was also very interested in social class. He differentiated among whites in
terms of social class (we discuss his thoughts on an elite group—“benevolent despots”—later, as well as his analysis and criticisms of the white working class), but in *The Philadelphia Negro* there is much about social class among African Americans. For example, one of his class systems is Grade 1, respectable families earning enough income to live well; Grade 2, respectable working class with steady paying work; Grade 3, the poor and very poor without enough steady income; and Grade 4, the “lowest class of criminals, prostitutes and loafers; the ‘submerged tenth’” (Du Bois, 1899/1996:311).

Du Bois not only wanted to make it clear that there are vast differences within the black community in terms of class (and in terms of spatial distribution, as we saw earlier), that they are not on one piece, but he also wanted to give special importance to the highest classes within the black community. He argued that “the better classes of the Negroes should recognize their duty toward the masses … toward lifting the rabble” (Du Bois, 1899/1996:392–393). Given his elite background and training, Du Bois, at this early stage in his career, accorded great importance to the elites of both races. Indeed, he argued for the need for elite whites interested in helping to “recognize the existence of the better class of Negroes [who] must gain their active aid and cooperation by generous and polite conduct” (396). *The Philadelphia Negro* concludes not with a rallying cry to black Americans, but with talk of the need for whites to be “polite and sympathetic” and “generous” to black Americans while, for their part, the latter are urged to engage in “proper striving.” Together, whites and African Americans will be able to “realize what the great founder of the city meant when he named it the City of Brotherly Love” (397).

Du Bois came to be known for the phrase “The Talented Tenth” to describe the small group at the top that were to be the leaders of the black community. He revisited that idea late in his career in light of being criticized for his elitism and because he began to take Marx’s ideas increasingly seriously. Marx’s ideas, of course, pointed to a revolution from below emanating from the masses. Although Du Bois did not abandon his views on the importance of leadership, he did modify them. In his later work, it was no longer enough for these leaders to be talented in a general sense, they also had to be experts in economics and its effect on African Americans. The “Talented Tenth” became the “Guiding Hundredth,” and they had to be willing to “sacrifice and plan such economic revolution in industry and just distribution of wealth, as would make the rise of our group possible” (Du Bois, 1948/1995:350).

The Benevolent Despot

If there is a hopeful figure in *The Philadelphia Negro* it is the “benevolent despot,” often a benevolent capitalist. At this early stage in his work, Du Bois retained some faith in whites, strong and benevolent leaders, and in capitalism. Thus, on the issue of economic and work-related problems, Du Bois argued that a benevolent despot might have sought to deal with the lack of training of African Americans and the discrimination practiced against them. However, there was “no benevolent despot, no philanthropist, no far-seeing captain of industry to prevent the Negro from losing even the skill he had learned or to inspire him by opportunities to learn more” (Du Bois, 1899/1996:127). However, characteristically Du Bois also called on African Americans to take responsibility: “Undoubtedly much blame can rightly be laid at the door of Negroes for submitting rather tamely to their organized opposition” (130). More positively, in terms of health-related problems, Du
Bois argued, “The main movement of reform must come from the Negroes themselves, and should start with a crusade for fresh air, cleanliness, healthfully located homes and proper food” (163).

Du Bois did not long hold out much hope for aid from the benevolent despot or, more specifically, from the capitalist. Indeed, in a later analysis of the economy of the post–Civil War South, he pointed an accusatory finger at northern capitalists “who have come to take charge of the industrial exploitation of the New South … there is in these new captains of industry neither love nor hate, neither sympathy nor romance; it is a cold question of dollars and dividends” (Du Bois, 1903/1996:170). And in a still later work, Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880 (1935/1998), capitalists, especially those from the North, are accorded much of the blame for the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War.

**Appeal to White Self-Interest**

An approach taken by Du Bois in this early study, and utilized many times over the course of his career, was to seek to improve the situation for black Americans by appealing to white self-interest. That is, he argued that whites, as well as society as a whole, would benefit from black educational and economic advancement as well as an amelioration of problems within the black community. For example, white employers and the economy as a whole would benefit from better-trained black workers with greater ability to succeed occupationally and in terms of income. The fact that whites were unwilling to recognize this, let alone help blacks, pointed to the fact that “one of the great postulates in the science of economics—that men will seek their economic advantage—is in this case untrue” (Du Bois, 1899/1996:146). That is, even though it is to whites’ collective advantage to have African Americans succeed economically, they are unwilling to help them and may even act to their further detriment. After describing the relatively poor health of African Americans (which he attributes largely to poor social conditions), Du Bois made the same point—whites and the community in general would benefit from better health among African Americans (a healthier workforce would provide more workers and be less of a drain on the community). More generally, Du Bois concluded, “Such discrimination is morally wrong, politically dangerous, industrially wasteful, and socially silly. It is the duty of whites to stop it, and to do so primarily for their own sakes” (1899/1996:394).
Theoretical Contributions

Although there is no “theory” in a modern sense in Du Bois’s work, there certainly are a series of general ideas that continue to be useful in thinking in theoretical terms about race in general and black Americans in particular. There is no general theory in his work because he never set out to create one and because he was involved in many other kinds of work, including *The Philadelphia Negro* (and other empirical works that occupied most of his attention until roughly 1910), later more autobiographical writings (in which, however, theoretical ideas were embedded), political tracts, and political activities of great variety and importance. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify several important theoretical ideas and twists and turns in his work.

The Race Concept

As we have already pointed out, Du Bois’s approach to sociology changed across his life. So, too, his theory of race changed across his life. His early ideas were shaped by a German romantic tradition that treated race (sometimes referred to as nation) as a real category of human difference. In this tradition, race referred not only to biological differences such as skin color but also to cultural differences. For example, in an early essay, Du Bois argued that the “race idea” is “the central thought of all history” and this is followed immediately with a definition of race: “a family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (1897/1995:21). Like many of his contemporaries, Du Bois held the racialist view that there are distinct races and that these races have unique qualities. However, as can be seen in the previous quotation, these differences are not biologically determined in any simple sense. Race also refers to a shared history and tradition. This suggests that race is also, and perhaps more importantly, a cultural difference that develops over large spans of historical time. This emphasis on culture led Aldon Morris (2015) to suggest that Du Bois offered what we would now call a social constructionist theory of race from the very beginning of his academic career.
The Niagara Movement: Historical Contexts

The Niagara Movement was a civil rights organization incorporated in January 1906. Its first meeting was in July 1905 in Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada, on the opposite side of Niagara Falls from Buffalo, New York. The original meeting had been planned for Buffalo but was moved at the last minute because of race prejudice (D. Lewis, 1993).

The movement was set against the backdrop of growing conflict between W. E. B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Each of these men, struggling to come to terms with post-slavery America, offered distinct and conflicting visions of the position of black people in American society. Washington headed up the Tuskegee Institute. He emphasized industrial training: education for black men in the trades. Du Bois viewed Washington’s approach to black education as accommodationist. By elevating manual labor over cultural and intellectual education, it effectively treated African Americans as second-class citizens, persons incapable of fully contributing to the culture and politics of American society. Du Bois, of course, held the view that black Americans could only flourish and America itself could only be strong with the intellectual, political, and cultural contributions of its black citizens. The Niagara Movement was dedicated to these goals of full social inclusion.

At great personal expense and risk, twenty-nine men from across America, and one teenage boy, attended the first Niagara meeting (D. Lewis, 1993:316). These “Niagarites” included figures such as newspaper man William Monroe Trotter (who, along with Du Bois, is considered one of the movement’s founders), former Atlanta university students Lafayette Hershaw and Freeman Murray, lawyer Clement Morgan, and Reverend Byron Gunner. Women were excluded from this first meeting, though this rule was changed for the second meeting at Harper’s Ferry. Du Bois, in his typical style, arrived “with cane and handlebar moustache” (D. Lewis, 1993:317).

The central accomplishment of the first meeting was the creation of a Declaration of Principles. The declaration begins by congratulating “the Negro-Americans on certain undoubted evidences of progress in the last decade, particularly the increase of intelligence, the buying of property, the checking of crime, the uplift in home life, the advance in literature and art, and the demonstration of constructive and executive ability in the conduct of great religious, economic and educational institutions.”10 The declaration then goes on to lay out numerous points of strong-worded protest. “Protest,” David Levering Lewis (1993:322) emphasized, “was at the heart of Niagara.” Key points included the following:

- Political rights: “We believe in manhood suffrage; we believe that no man is so good, intelligent or wealthy as to be entrusted wholly with the welfare of his neighbor.”
- Civil rights: “All American citizens have the right to equal treatment in places of public entertainment.”
- Education: “Common school education should be free to all American children and compulsory.”
- Courts: “We demand upright judges in courts, juries selected without discrimination or account of color and the same measure of punishment and the same efforts at reformation for black as for white offenders.”
- Health: “We plead for health—for an opportunity to live in decent houses and localities, for a chance to rear our children in physical and moral cleanliness.”
- Color-line: “Any discrimination based simply on race or color is barbarous, we care not how hallowed it be by custom, expediency, or prejudice.”
- “Jim-Crow” cars: “We protest against the ‘Jim Crow’ car, since its effect is and must be to make us pay first-class fare for third-class accommodations, render us open to insults and discomfort and to crucify wantonly our manhood, womanhood and self-respect.”

Despite this clear and rousing statement, the organization itself lasted only four more years until its last meeting in Sea Isle City, New Jersey, in 1909. This is the same year that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), generally regarded as the successor to the Niagara Movement, was established. Du Bois, who also was a founding member of the NAACP, encouraged members of the Niagara Movement to join its ranks.

The early emphasis on racial and cultural difference also led Du Bois to the view that the goal of African Americans (and implicitly of all races) is not necessarily integration, and certainly not “absorption by the white Americans,” but rather, to serve as the “advance guard” of “Pan-Negroism” (1897/1995:23).11 Different races, he believed, had unique gifts—forms of culture—to contribute to world civilization. In these early
formulations, Du Bois argued that different races complement each other and humanity would achieve its greatest potential when all races were permitted to flourish (Appiah, 2014). The tragedy of modern life is that one race, the white race, had come to dominate and subjugate all others. In this context, Du Bois (1923/1995) saw African Americans as offering America and humanity unique kinds of culture. Indeed in some instances he saw blacks as superior to whites and thought it was their role to “soften” the hardness of the “twisted white American environment” (Du Bois, 1933/1995b:73). He pointed to such things as black music (the only truly original American music, he argued), 12 fairy tales, and humor. More generally, Du Bois argued that “in its normal condition” the Negro race is “at once the strongest and gentlest of the races of men” (1915/1995:53). Whereas whites are seen as immersed in a “mad money-getting plutocracy” (Du Bois, 1897/1995:25), blacks are seen as being able to ameliorate these excesses by infusing American society with their softer, gentler culture. To accomplish this goal, as well as to defend and further their self-interests, Du Bois urged race organization, solidarity, and unity.

It is the race-conscious black man cooperating together in his own institutions and movements who will eventually emancipate the colored race, and the great step ahead today is for the American Negro to accomplish his economic emancipation through voluntary determined cooperative effort.

(Du Bois, 1934/1995:558)

Along these lines, he made it clear that he was not opposed to segregation per se but segregation accompanied by discrimination. As long as segregated facilities were more or less equal and operate on the basis of the same principles, he had no problem with their segregation on the basis of race. However, he later came to the realization that such “separate but equal” facilities are “rarely possible” (Du Bois, 1944/1995:615).

Race, of course, was at the base of what Du Bois famously called the “Negro Problem,” or the frictions between the races in America. As noted from the outset of this chapter, he thought in terms of a “color-line” in the United States in general and in the South in particular. (As early as his college-student years, Du Bois said that he “developed a belligerent attitude toward the color bar” [1968:125]). For example, he described a frightful chasm at the color-line across which men pass at their peril. Thus, then and now, there stand in the South two separate worlds; and separate not simply in the higher realms of social intercourse, but also in church and school, on railway and street-car, in hotels and theatres, in streets and city sections, in books and newspapers, in asylums and jails, in hospitals and graveyards.

(Du Bois, 1903/1996:97)

However, later Du Bois came to broaden his perspective and to see the American case as part of a global color-line. In fact, he had anticipated that position earlier in one of his most famous statements, which seems even more true in the early years of the twenty-first century:
The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line, the question is to how far differences of race … are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.

(Du Bois, 1900/1995:639)

Thus, Du Bois (1903/1996:15) no longer focused exclusively on the United States but looked at black people in “Asia and Africa and the islands of the sea” and more generally at other races throughout the world. Du Bois came to think more broadly in terms of race rather than focusing exclusively on one race—the Negro. Furthermore, he began to discuss not just the need for black organizations (including Negro colleges) but for unified organizations involving all “colored races.”

In spite of this focus on race, Du Bois recognized that there were no “pure” races and that the vast majority of the differences between the races stemmed from differences in their environment, especially their social environment. This social constructionist perspective became more apparent over time and by the 1920s Du Bois could say: “There are no races, in the sense of great, separate, pure breeds of men, differing in attainment, development and capacity” (cited in Appiah, 2014:111). Race is not an engrained fact of human difference but an idea brought about by shared circumstances. Early in his work these shared circumstances were described as cultural. However, as Du Bois became more Marxist in his outlook, he argued that the shared circumstance of black Americans and people of color around the world was one of suffering. Famously, in Dusk of Dawn (1940/2007:77) he said that “the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.” By this he meant to emphasize that racial identities are not biologically given. Nor are they only cultural constructions, but they are defined by common struggles suffered under economic and political domination. Even though Du Bois continued to recognize the important role that the race concept played in constituting meaningful identity, he also clearly saw that it was a construction built out of cultural, economic, and political forces, most of which operated against persons of color.

The Veil

One of Du Bois’s most famous concepts is that of the Veil.14 By this idea, he meant that there is a clear separation, a barrier, between blacks and whites. The imagery is not one of a wall, but rather of thin, porous material through which each race can see the other. However, no matter how thin and porous the Veil, no matter how easy it is to see through, it still clearly separates the races. In his “Forethought” to The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois made it clear that it was his intention to “lift” the Veil, to venture behind or within it, in order to examine, and let his (white) readers glimpse, the “souls” of black people in America:

Leaving, then, the white world, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls…. And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?
Although the Veil is usually seen as capable of being seen through and of being lifted, there are times when Du Bois saw it as more opaque and impossible to lift, let alone breach. For example, in describing the “older South,” he argued that “we build around them walls so high, and hang between them and the light a Veil so thick, that they shall not even think of breaking through” (Du Bois, 1903/1996:90).

Du Bois discussed the Veil as something that

- shuts blacks out from the rest of the world and within which they live
- blacks are born with
- falls or lays between blacks and whites (e.g., Du Bois [1903/1996:65] described an incident where he was greeted amiably by a white commissioner, but when it came time for dinner “then fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first, then I—alone”) even though at times it is lifted, at least partially
- affects the way blacks and whites see each other
- hangs between African Americans and opportunity
- through education and truth, it would become possible, as he does, to “dwell above the Veil” (Du Bois, 1903/1996:110)
- it is possible to dwell above in death15
- negatively affects both blacks and whites
- impoverishes them in different ways, including their “souls”
- he hopes someday might be lifted in order to “set the prisoned free” (Du Bois, 1903/1996:215)

Overall, “worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment” (Du Bois, 1903/1996:203).

The following is one of Du Bois’s best and most lyrical statements on the Veil:

And then—the Veil, the Veil of color. It drops as drops the night on southern seas—vast, sudden, unanswering. There is Hate behind it, and Cruelty and Tears. As one peers through its intricate, unfathomable pattern of ancient, old, old design, one sees blood and guilt and misunderstanding. And yet it hangs there, this Veil, between then and now, between Pale and Colored and Black and White—between You and Me. Surely it is but a thought–thing, tenuous, intangible; yet just as surely is it true and terrible and not in our little day may you and I lift it. We may feverishly unravel its edges and even climb slow with giant shears to where its ringed and gilded top nestles close to the throne of Eternity. But as we work and climb we shall see through streaming eyes and hear with aching ears, lynching and murder, cheating and despising, degrading and lying, so flashed and flashed through this vast hanging darkness that the Doer never sees the Deed and the Victim knows not the Victor and Each hate All in wild and bitter ignorance. Listen, O Isles, to those voices from within the Veil, for they portray the most human hurt of the Twentieth Cycle.
Among the notable things about this statement is Du Bois's recognition that while the Veil is a “thought thing,” an idea or rather a series of ideas, it is not easily lifted, cut, or destroyed. It will be a long-term struggle to lift the Veil and that event was not to come anytime soon. That something like the Veil described by Du Bois continues to exist points to the continued importance of this view, indeed all of his thinking on the Veil.

**Double Consciousness, or “Twoness”**

Closely related to the concept of the Veil is one of Du Bois’s best-known and most influential ideas—double consciousness. By this, he means that a black person has an unusual feeling, a sensation of

always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

(Du Bois, 1903/1996:5)

To put this another way, African Americans were simultaneously outsiders and insiders, or more specifically, outsiders within. That is, they were (and to some degree still are) both inside and outside of the dominant white society (separated, of course, by the Veil). On the one hand, this position gives them unique and perhaps enhanced insight into society as a whole (see his standpoint theory discussed earlier), and on the other it produces enormous tension that manifests itself in all sorts of pathologies within the black community. As Du Bois put it, “this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds” of black Americans (1903/1996:7).

Given the existence of this double consciousness, Du Bois argued that the black American longs “to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older [Negro, American] selves to be lost…. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (1903/1996:6).

Du Bois’s thinking on double consciousness resonates with a number of classical and contemporary theoretical ideas. José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown (2015) argued that the theory of double consciousness should be considered a social psychological theory of self-development equivalent to the theories of William James, George Herbert Mead (see Chapter 15), and Charles Horton Cooley. All three of these theorists argued that the self develops through interactive relationship with others. Cooley, for example, said that selfhood develops through the “looking-glass” of other people. According to Itzigsohn and Brown (2015:235), Du Bois departed from this tradition when he emphasized the failure of communication or lack of interaction faced by persons of color: “The theory of Double Consciousness brings to the fore what the other classical theorists of the self
could not see: the presence of the veil (an intangible boundary that affects the perceptions of and relations between racializing and racialized subjects." Double consciousness emerges in a social context where subjugated people and their lived experiences are invisible to dominant social powers. Viewed as such, the theory of double consciousness links macrosociological structural issues (social inequality and racism) with the micro-social problem of personal experience—self-consciousness. A similar idea can be found in Simmel's discussion of the “stranger” (see Chapter 9). The stranger would likely suffer from double consciousness, and black Americans can be thought of as strangers within white-dominated American society. More contemporaneously, Patricia Hill Collins’s (1990, 1998) work on “the outsider within” has strong resemblances to Du Bois’s thinking on double consciousness. The point is that although Du Bois was largely ignored by the mainstream within sociology in general, and sociological theory in particular, his ideas do resonate with a number of strands of theory and empirical research within the mainstream.
Economics

Du Bois devoted a great deal of attention to economic factors, and although he discussed many other factors (social, political, etc.), in the end he usually came back to economics as the most basic and most important factor. For example: “The main weakness of the Negro’s position is that since emancipation he has never had an adequate economic foundation” (Du Bois, 1935/1998:565). He tied this position into the kind of economic determinism often associated with Marx: “I believe in the dictum of Karl Marx, that the economic foundation of a nation is widely decisive for its politics, its art and its culture” (Du Bois, 1944/1995:610). As Charles Lemert put it, “Du Bois’s most distinctive theoretical conviction was: that race never stands alone, apart from economic realities…. Race makes little sense apart from class” (2000:357).

However, although Du Bois recognized the ultimate importance of economic factors, he was highly critical of the attention accorded, and the amount of time and energy devoted, to the striving for economic success. At first, he criticized white America for its fetishization of money; for its overarching materialism. Later, he criticized the United States as a whole for this. He thought there were more important, “higher,” things in life that had been lost sight of by white Americans. In contrast, African Americans had not yet accorded as much importance to material success (perhaps, at least in part, because they had not been given a real opportunity to achieve it) and Du Bois hoped they never would attach too much importance to material success. This is part of the reason why Du Bois argued so often and so determinedly for the importance of education, especially higher education, in the black community. Education would permit blacks to achieve a range of higher goals and objectives than mere economic success. This is also one of the central reasons why Du Bois was critical of Booker T. Washington, especially the latter’s economic focus on success in industry and the trades. Not only did Washington’s philosophy relegate African Americans to secondary economic status, but also lost in this focus was the need for leadership, morality, and “self-respecting manhood for black folk” (Du Bois, 1904/1995:330). This is closely linked to Du Bois’s view that Washington preached subservience and to Du Bois’s refusal, as he put it, “to kiss the hands that smite us” (331).
Karl Marx, Socialism, and Communism

We have seen that early in his career, Du Bois could have been considered in some respects quite conservative, even elitist. After completing the early scientific phase of his career, he became active in the Niagara Movement and in the NAACP in an effort to improve the situation of black Americans. However, these were reformist organizations seeking change of, and within, the system. Indeed, Du Bois admitted this when in editorializing for the NAACP, he wrote, “We do not believe in revolution” (1921/1995:555). Earlier, he had said, “By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men” (Du Bois, 1903/1996:61). In these initial phases of his career he, like most other American social scientists and public intellectuals of the day, placed great faith in reforms of various types (e.g., education) and even allowed himself romantic notions of harmony between blacks and whites: “Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph (Du Bois, 1903/1996:189).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois was critical of socialism, characterizing it as “cheap and dangerous” (1903/1996:151). However, as widespread reform movements proved ineffective, Du Bois was drawn to socialism and he retained an interest, sympathy, and hope in it for the rest of his life. He joined the Socialist Party in 1911. Although he soon resigned, he continued to consider himself a socialist. Toward the end of his life, Du Bois retained that orientation, although he had come to collapse the distinction between socialism and communism: “I believe in socialism. I seek a world where the ideals of communism will triumph —to each according to his need; from each according to his ability” (1958/1995:147).

Early on, Du Bois was critical of socialist party organizations (as well as the labor movement) for continuing to discriminate against African Americans. More important, even as late as 1933, Du Bois continued to adhere to the view that the “lowest and most fatal degree of its [black labor’s] suffering comes not from capitalists but from fellow white laborers” (1933/1995a:541). This is a view that goes all the way back to The Philadelphia Negro, where Du Bois saw black workers suffering from competition from white laborers, primarily immigrants. As a result, at this point Du Bois held out little hope for a union of black and white workers, Marxian theory, socialism, and communism:

How now does the philosophy of Karl Marx apply today to colored labor? First of all colored labor has no common ground with white labor. No soviet of technocrats would do more than exploit colored labor in order to raise the status of whites. No revolt of a white proletariat could be started if its object was to make black workers their economic, political and social equals. It is for this reason that American socialism for fifty years has been dumb on the Negro problem, and the communists cannot even get a respectful hearing in America unless they begin by expelling Negroes…. There is not at present the slightest indication that a Marxian revolution based on a united class-conscious proletariat is anywhere on the American far horizon.

(Du Bois, 1933/1995a:542–544)
However, by the 1940s, Du Bois had come to the view that the white working class could come to form an alliance with black workers, at least in the South (1947/1995). Ultimately, Du Bois came to the conclusion “that without the overthrow of capitalist monopoly the Negro cannot survive in the United States as a self-respecting cultural unit, integrating gradually into the nation, but not on terms which imply self-destruction or loss of his possible gifts to America” (1957/1995:357).

Gradually, in his later years, Du Bois moved fitfully in the direction of communism. This was motivated, in part, by the experiences he had during his travels around the world, especially the Soviet Union. Following an early visit there, he proclaimed: “I am a Bolshevik” (Du Bois, 1926/1995b:582). Although he continued to have reservations about communism as it was practiced in the Soviet Union, he was especially critical of American communism and its leaders, which he called “young jackasses” (Du Bois, 1931/1995:588). Still later, in another of his dramatic shifts, he became something of a worshiper of both the Soviet Union and China. This led to some unfortunate and embarrassing statements, including applauding “democracy” in the Soviet Union, welcoming the Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising, contending that “Joseph Stalin was a great man” (Du Bois, 1953/1995:796), and arguing that “it was only a matter of time and a comparatively short time when the Soviet Union will lead the world in industry” (Du Bois, 1968:39).

By the 1950s, discouraged by the continuing humiliation of, and discrimination against, African Americans, Du Bois was arguing for some sort of socialist/communist change within the United States. He suggested “drastically curbing the present power of concentrated wealth, by assuming ownership of some natural resources, by administering many of our key industries and by socializing our services for public welfare” (Du Bois, 1951/1995:621). And, he seemed now to accord social class far more importance than he had earlier. In fact, he foresaw a time when “Negroes will be divided into classes even more sharply than now, and the main mass will become a part of the working class of the nation and the world, which will surely go socialist” (625).

On October 1, 1961, Du Bois, at the age of 93, applied for membership in the Communist Party of the United States. In his letter of application, he said: “Capitalism cannot reform itself; it is doomed to self-destruction….. In the end Communism will triumph. I want to help to bring that day” (Du Bois, 1961/1995:632). Here is the way he defined communism:

I mean by communism, a planned way of life in the production of wealth and work designed for building a state whose object is the highest welfare of its people and not merely the profit of a part. I believe that all men should be employed according to their ability and that wealth and services should be distributed according to need.

(Du Bois, 1968:57)

Early in his career, Du Bois admitted to not having read Marx’s work (he was certainly not the only social theorist and/or sociologist of the day guilty of this). Of his days at Fisk, Du Bois said, “In class I do not remember ever hearing Karl Marx mentioned nor socialism discussed” (1968:126). At Harvard, he recalled, “Karl Marx was mentioned but only incidentally and as one whose doubtful theories had long since been
refuted. Socialism as dream of philanthropy or as will-o’-wisp hotheads was dismissed as unimportant” (133). Of his time in Germany, Du Bois said, “The history of the development of Marxism and of revisionists … was too complicated for a student like myself to understand, who had received no real teaching along this line” (168).

However, he began to read Marx seriously during World War I and claimed that he later mastered Marx’s theory. By the 1930s he was using texts such as *The Communist Manifesto* in his classes at Atlanta University. The influence of Marx in general, and the *Manifesto* in particular, is clear in the following call to Africa and Pan-African Socialism (Kendhammar, 2007):

You have nothing to lose but your Chains!

You have a continent to regain!

You have freedom and human dignity to attain!

(Du Bois, 1968:404)

Although he was influenced by Marxian theory, Du Bois was disinclined to write scholarly metatheoretical treatises, with the result that what one is likely to get is elliptical statements, or brief sketches—even caricatures—of, Marx’s theory in his work (Du Bois, 1933/1995a:539–540). This is reflected in Du Bois’s rather simplistic definition of communism (see the preceding quote), a definition that reflects his lack of deep engagement with Marx's ideas as well as those of the wide variety of neo-Marxists.

Yet, to be fair to Du Bois, he never sought to do this kind of scholarly work, even though he was certainly exposed to it and how it was to be done, in his graduate days at Harvard and Berlin. It seems fair to say that in Marxian terms, Du Bois was always drawn to an integration of theory and praxis. In addition, he was writing to be read by a larger audience and not just by other scholars. This is reflected both in his literary and poetic works on the one hand and also in his numerous editorials, magazine articles, and newspaper pieces.

Marxian theory, in a simplified and perhaps distorted form, plays a central role in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880* (Du Bois, 1935/1998). The book begins with the black worker (the slave) who was the “ultimate exploited,” the source of surplus value, and the “underlying cause” of “civil war in America” (15–16). Du Bois turned his attention next to white workers who, in an argument reminiscent of his findings in Philadelphia’s seventh ward, are described as feeling threatened by competition from black workers. Thus, with the end of slavery in 1863, white workers welcomed the caste system that served to protect them from open competition with black workers. Underlying the race issue was the ultimately more important, or at least more general, issue of economics. Northern (and later Southern) capitalists were willing to accept the subordination, even exclusion, of blacks as long as they could use the same methods of control and exploitation on Southern white workers that they were already using on Northern whites. Du Bois saw this capitalist hegemony evolving into a dictatorship of property and capital, of “super-capital” and “great corporations,” ultimately forming a kind of “super-government” (584). To Du Bois, it was capitalism that had
undermined Reconstruction and it was that economic system that was destroying America and much of the rest of the world in his day.
Du Bois anticipated the contemporary interest in studies of race, racism, and colonization. Moreover, as Itzigsohn and Brown (2015) pointed out, Du Bois did not simply treat race as a discrete phenomenon. Rather, he described the social processes that create the category of race and use it to organize social life. In other words, Du Bois was interested in what contemporary theorists call the process of racialization (Omi and Winant, 2015). Recognizing the importance of Du Bois’s work, much recent scholarship has aimed to demonstrate his status as a canonical figure from the classical period. Not only did he introduce concepts that have now become of central importance to sociology but as Aldon Morris (2015) and Earl Wright (2002) have argued, Du Bois’s Atlanta Sociological Laboratory could be considered the first established school of American sociology.

Contemporary scholars have also made use of Du Boisian concepts to understand contemporary social problems. Earlier in this chapter we discussed The Philadelphia Negro. Though The Philadelphia Negro is generally viewed as an atheoretical book, both Kevin Loughran (2015) and Marcus Hunter (2013) have argued that the text contains within it a layered but significant theory of urban space. In particular, using The Philadelphia Negro they have each described the relationship between the socially constructed category of race and the organization of urban space. Hunter has pointed out that the development of racialized enclaves (ghettos), like the seventh ward in Philadelphia, cannot be explained by economic processes alone but must also account “for racial historical events, namely those involving conflict” (Hunter, 2013:13–14). Space reproduces social categories, leaving racialized minorities to live in economically deprived neighborhoods. Yet, like Du Bois, Hunter has emphasized the agency that black urbanites have exercised in building unique institutions and developing unique social resources: “the creation of a Black community is a reflection of urban Black residents confronting inequality in an effort to thrive and survive in urban America” (Hunter, 2013:19). In particular, Hunter has drawn attention to Du Bois’s discussion of the role of the church in the spatial organization of the seventh ward.

Du Bois has also been discussed by scholars who study democracy and human rights. For example, a recent issue of the Du Bois Review (2011) titled “Du Bois as a Political Philosopher” focused on how contemporary political theorists are engaging with Du Bois’s ideas about democracy and leadership. Closer to sociology, Du Bois’s ideas have been used to discuss human rights. Nick Stevenson argued that “for human rights to be effective, they need to be re-imagined as rights to a ‘dignified’ life” (2014:183). Stevenson regarded Du Bois as a theorist who thought carefully about problems of human dignity. Du Bois, throughout his writing, was concerned with the problem of human dignity, especially the dignity of African Americans. One route to achieving dignity was through education and full-fledged cultural expression of the kind exemplified in The Souls of Black Folk. However, Du Bois also recognized that the ability for black Americans to express themselves was compromised by macrosociological factors. In fact, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, racism and economic inequality of the larger social order leads to a debilitating double consciousness. Yet at the same time this double consciousness allows black Americans, like Du Bois, to think about human rights and dignity in complex ways that cannot be fully appreciated by those on the other side of the color-line. For
these reasons and others, Du Bois’s voluminous and varied body of work has become a model for both academics and political activists.
Summary

There is no question that in addition to being a towering public figure throughout the first half of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois was also a sociologist and social thinker of great importance. His ideas were influenced by positivist science, pragmatist philosophy, German romanticism, and, later in life, Marxism. *The Philadelphia Negro* was unquestionably a pioneering urban ethnography, one that demonstrates Du Bois’s commitment to the scientific methods and remains of interest and use to this day. *The Souls of Black Folk* exemplifies the poetic and autobiographical side of Du Bois’s work. And *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880*, in spite of its problems associated with an unsophisticated and questionable use of Marxian theory, remains of use to students today interested in the events of that period and how to better understand them.

Though in the past Du Bois was not thought of as a social theorist, changes in definitions of theory allow us to see Du Bois as a unique and particular compelling classical theorist. In particular he offered a theory that helps us to think about race and the processes of racialization (and many other issues—e.g., gender). Especially notable is his early recognition of, and thinking about, the *race issue* and the *color-line*. Ideas on concepts like the *Veil* and *double consciousness* not only continue to be relevant, but are worthy of further thought and exploration by contemporary students of race. Especially interesting is Du Bois’s struggle over many years with the theories of socialism, communism, and especially of Karl Marx. He not only vacillated but changed course rather abruptly at many points in his career. It would be interesting to see further explorations, perhaps by researchers with access to the Du Bois archives, of the true extent of his knowledge of and commitment to Marxian theory. This also leads to the need to assess Du Bois’s place in Marxian and neo-Marxian theory. Just as he has rarely been included in discussions of the major classical social theorists, he has also not been included in overviews of major Marxian thinkers. Inclusion in those pantheons, and discussions of his place in them, are both now more likely as recognition grows of Du Bois’s importance as a sociologist and a social thinker.
Notes

1. In fact, on getting an award late in life from a Czechoslovakian university, Du Bois (1968:25) noted, “No American university (except Negro institutions in understandable self-defense) has ever recognized that I had any claim to scholarship.”

2. Not only did he teach in a sociology department at two different points in his career, but he was a member of the American Sociological Society (from 1905), attended its meetings, and published in leading journals such as the American Journal of Sociology (D. Lewis, 1993:372–373).

3. However, Du Bois (1968:222) was later to surrender, at least in part, his commitment to such scientific work because there was little interest in it and, more importantly, because “one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved.” In fact, upon later joining the NAACP, he said, “My career as a scientist was to be swallowed up in my role as a master of propaganda. This was not wholly to my liking” (Du Bois, 1968:253).

4. This was in many senses a comparative-historical study, involving not only historical comparisons, but also contemporaneous comparisons with various European groups.

5. Although Du Bois usually talked in terms of social classes, at times he used the stronger term of a “caste” system to describe the situation confronting blacks in America. In this context he discussed the “Jim Crow” laws that established de facto (legal) segregation and discrimination on the basis of race.

6. Du Bois (1898/1995) described a similar class system in a study of African Americans in Farmville, Virginia.

7. Indeed, Du Bois was often criticized as being an elitist, especially in his early work.

8. Later, Du Bois radically revised his thinking and abandoned such romantic rhetoric.

9. This constitutes a critique of what today is called rational-choice theory.

10. All quotations taken from the “Declaration of Principles 1905” can be found at http://scua.library.umass.edu/collections/etext/dubois/niagara.pdf.

11. Yet, at least in his critique of the separatism (back to Africa) of Marcus Garvey, Du Bois (1923/1995:477) saw the “exchange of one race supremacy for another” as futile and spiritually bankrupt.

12. As noted earlier, The Souls of Black Folk (Du Bois, 1903/1996) is organized around, and each chapter begins with, verses from Negro spirituals.

13. Du Bois even called for all laborers, white and nonwhite, throughout the world to join together. However, this was an atypical position for Du Bois, who ordinarily saw white laborers (and their unions) as the enemy of black (and other nonwhite) workers. This opposition is also seen as a key factor in the failure of

14. Du Bois also used the metaphor of a “cave” to illustrate the position of African Americans who could be seen as peering out from it, being ignored by white passersby, and as screaming out in a vacuum (D. Lewis, 2000:474).

15. After the death of his infant son, Du Bois (1903/1996:214) saw “the world … darkly through the Veil.”

16. However, D. L. Lewis (1993:111) argued that one of Du Bois’s papers shows that he “knew far more about Marxist economic theory at Harvard than he subsequently let on.”

17. By this time Du Bois had assembled “one of the most comprehensive private libraries on scientific socialism in the country” (D. Lewis, 2000:263).

18. For example, he made highly questionable use of the idea of a “general strike” in his discussion of actions taken by slaves during the Civil War.

12 Thorstein Veblen
In Thorstein Veblen we encounter a unique figure in the pantheon of classical social theorists. Veblen has always had a small, but significant, following in the social sciences. However, his influence has increased recently because his famous work on “conspicuous consumption” is in line with both the growing importance of consumption (both absolutely and in comparison to production) in American society and much of the rest of the world, as well as the increasing interest in sociology (and other fields) in consumption. Yet, the irony is that Veblen was very much a product of his times (late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America) and, as a result, he shares with the other classical theorists of the day a focal interest in issues relating to production. The increasing interest in his work on consumption has led to a reexamination of Veblen’s work on production, and although it is not without its problems (e.g., the repetition of a single theme in a series of books and articles covering a span of many decades), there is much more to Veblen’s theorizing than his valuable work on consumption (B. Rosenberg, 1956).
Intellectual Influences

Thorstein Veblen was influenced by the ideas of a wide range of social thinkers, but he synthesized inputs from those bodies of thought and, in the process, created a perspective that is quite distinctive. Among those who influenced Veblen were Karl Marx, a variety of evolutionary thinkers (Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner), a number of economists (Adam Smith, Alfred Marshall), and even some “anonymous authors of the Icelandic sagas” (B. Rosenberg, 1963:2).

Marxian Theory

Although he recognized many subdivisions within each social class, Veblen, like Marx, operated with essentially a two-class model of social stratification (the business and industrial classes, with the former controlling the latter), but in contrast to Marx, Veblen’s model is not based on ownership of the means of production, but rather on amount of wealth and whether or not control is exercised over others. The business class “own[s] wealth invested in large holdings and … thereby control[s] the conditions of life for the rest”; the industrial class does “not own wealth in sufficiently large holdings, and [its] conditions of life are therefore controlled by others” (Veblen, 1919/1964:161). Other ways of putting the distinction between the two classes is that there is a division between those “who live on free income [essentially, unearned income; see later in chapter] and those who live by work”; “between those who control the conditions of work and the rate and volume of output and to whom the net output of industry goes as free income, on the one hand, and those others who have the work to do and to whom a livelihood is allowed by these persons in control, on the other hand”; “between the kept classes and the underlying community from which their keep is drawn” (Veblen, 1919/1964:162). Later, Veblen (1923:9) put the issue in an explicitly non-Marxist way: “this … cleavage, in material interest and in sentiment, runs not between those who own something and those who own nothing, as has habitually been set out in the formulas of the doctrinaires, but between those who own more than they personally can use and those who have urgent use for more than they own.”

Another key difference between Marx and Veblen is that for Marx the creative force was labor, whereas Veblen saw the “industrial arts” (defined by Veblen [1923:63] as “the accumulated knowledge of ways and means”), especially technology, as creative forces (we say more about the industrial arts later in this chapter). For example, Veblen (1923:63) argued, “The state of the industrial arts … must in the nature of things always be the prime factor in human industry.” One consequence of this is that labor and its emancipation does not occupy the central role in Veblen’s work that it does in Marx’s. In fact, Veblen has a rather low regard for the working class. It is those who create and maintain the industrial arts—the technologists and engineers—who are central and who would lead a revolution against the business class, were it to occur. Workers, at best, would follow their lead.

One of the basic principles that Veblen does share with Marx is a materialistic orientation. Veblen (1923:205) defined material conditions as “the ways and means of living and of procuring a livelihood.” The industrial arts are part of the material conditions, as is the population base. Veblen argued, “in the long run, of course, the pressure of changing material circumstances will have to shape the lines of human conduct, on pain of
extinction” (1923:17). Thus, for example, changes in norms, values, and ways of thinking follow changes in the material bases (and are therefore always out of date).

In spite of a number of similarities, Veblen (1906/1963) was not a Marxist.1 Veblen criticized Marx for a number of things, including buying into the doctrine of natural rights (e.g., the laborer’s right to the entire product of labor); being in the thrall of Hegelian philosophy; adopting the latter’s theory of change rather than a Darwinian evolutionary perspective of a cumulative sequence of change without a teleology, or final perfect end (to Veblen [1906/1963:72], “Darwinism has largely supplanted Hegelianism”); operating with other ideas (conscious class struggle) that do not fit well with a Hegelian approach; using outmoded psychological assumptions (hedonistic calculus based on self-interest); using the ideas of the political economists in ways that were not consistent with their intended use; having nothing to say about the future society that is supposed to replace capitalism; and making a series of predictions that have not been borne out by later events. Overall, although Veblen was not a Marxist, at least some of his ideas show the impact of Marxian theory.

**Evolutionary Theory**

Influenced by Darwin and the Social Darwinists (especially Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner), Veblen operated with an evolutionary perspective (Tilman, 2007). He viewed human society as being dominated by a struggle for existence with the fittest social institutions and habits of thought surviving. He saw progress in human history with not only the fit social institutions and individuals surviving, but the unfit perishing. Furthermore, he saw a process of institutions and habits of thought adapting to changing circumstances. Above all, and most generally, an evolutionary perspective was useful to Veblen in allowing him to emphasize that social institutions change and develop.

The selective adaptation that lies at the core of evolutionary theory is never totally successful. Institutions are received from the past and exist in the present because they have survived the process of selective adaptation. However, they are still derived from the past and, as such, are never fully in tune with present circumstances; institutions adapted from the past can never catch up with changing social circumstances. Thus, Veblen (1899/1994:191) concluded, “institutions of to-day—the present accepted scheme of life—do not entirely fit the situation of to-day.” However, as a result of inherent inertia or conservatism, there is a tendency for social institutions to persist even when they are not fully adapted to changing circumstances. This means that people are, at least to some degree, rendered ill-equipped to handle present-day demands. However, they are likely to become aware of the discontinuity between the demands of their current life and the social institutions that are holdovers from the past. This awareness is one of the things that leads to changes in social institutions designed to bring them more into line with present realities. However, some groups (such as the leisure class, discussed later) are sheltered from everyday realities, especially everyday economic exigencies, with the result that their way of life is able to remain more attuned to past realities. Such groups, especially if they are of high status and are emulated by other groups, are likely to be conservative forces that retard social progress and the efforts of others to bring social institutions up to date. In spite of such opposition, social institutions do change and develop; they selectively adapt to changing circumstances.
Veblen distinguished between the evolution of the community and the evolution of the individual. He argued that the difference between them has led to an important discontinuity in evolution. Communities have, in Veblen’s view, evolved to the point where they no longer need to compete with one another, but rather need to cooperate in industrial matters. However, individuals have retained the need to compete in order to succeed and further their own interests and careers. Thus, individuals “lag” behind changes at the collective level.

Overall, Veblen operated with a basic, two-stage model of evolution. Veblen called the earlier stage “savage society” and tended to have a positive view of it, describing it as a good society being characterized by peace and cooperation. In contrast to Hobbes, Veblen saw the primitive, savage state as pointing rather to “peace than to war as the habitual situation” (Veblen, 1922/1964:100). The later stage of predatory “barbarism” is viewed much more negatively as being characterized by a warlike and competitive character. The focus here is on the achievement of the individual rather than the well-being of the collectivity. In the early, savage culture, the industrial arts were employed for the common good. However, in the predatory, barbarian culture, the focus shifted to self-interest and to using the industrial arts to gain advantages at the expense of others.

Although the world had moved beyond the early stages of barbarism through handicrafts and the machine age, Veblen believed that the society he analyzed and lived in was only a later stage of barbarism. Thus, even the machine age is characterized by individual competitiveness and is, as we will see, conducive to warlike relations among nations.

A key aspect of this evolutionary process is a shift from free workmanship in savage society, a situation in which workmanship is the basis of industry, to the predatory, barbarian society in which property relations, or pecuniary interests, control industry. The basis for pecuniary control arises when production yields income above and beyond that which is needed by the workers to subsist. In addition, material factors such as raw material and technology tie industry to a particular place with the result that the surveillance, control, and economic exploitation of workers become more possible. It becomes profitable to own the material means of industry and along with that comes control over the more immaterial aspects of the industrial arts. Ownership of the means of production often comes about as a result of warfare and, as a result, is clearly part of a predatory, barbarian culture. All of this finds its most perfect expression in the great pecuniary cultures of the Occident.

Although not devoid of utility, Veblen’s evolutionary theory now seems like an unfortunate product of his intellectual times, which were dominated by Darwinian theory, Social Darwinism, and Spencerian evolutionism. It leads, to put it mildly, to a questionable and simplistic model of human history. It also gives his work a very dated feel and it led Veblen into some very unfortunate positions. For example, he adopted a racist view of evolution when he discussed the evolution of “lower ethnic elements” (Veblen, 1899/1994:217), viewing “the negro population of the South” as “low in economic efficiency, or in intelligence, or both” (322).

**Economic Theory**

If Veblen was identified with any field during his lifetime, it was economics (he was offered the presidency of the American Economic Association, but refused the position). However, Veblen was highly critical of mainstream economics (K. McCormick, 2011). Among other things, he was critical of economic theorists for
adopting the idea of natural laws that led to the orderly unfolding of human conduct to reach the ordained end of human happiness (Veblen, 1899–1900/1964). He accused Adam Smith, among others, of operating with such a perspective and for making the facts fit with preconceptions about natural law and the teleology of the theory. Later economists replaced the achievement of such an end with a hedonistic, utilitarian view, which saw conduct as “the pursuit of the greatest gain or least sacrifice” (Veblen, 1899–1900/1964:97). Still later economists (e.g., Alfred Marshall) offered a sense of a “consummately [sic] conceived and self-balanced mechanism” (143). All of these are rejected for Veblen’s preferred Darwinian evolutionary view of a “cumulatively unfolding process of an institutional adaptation to cumulatively unfolding exigencies” (143).

Veblen (1909/1964) saw more recent marginal utility economics as a variant of, and sharing some of the same problems with, classical economic theory. It is a static, hedonistic, rationalistic, teleological (current events are governed by their future consequences), deductive theory that accepts natural rights, especially that of ownership. Marginal utility theory is seen as solely concerned with distribution and having little to offer on such issues as consumption. More important, it is dominated by an interest in “the method of inference by which an individual is presumed invariably to balance pleasure and pain under given conditions that are presumed to be normal and invariable” (162). Given its teleological and deductive character, it has little to say on cause and effect in general, and more specifically on that which is of greatest importance to Veblen, “the causes of change or the unfolding sequence of the phenomena of economic life” (152). Thus, on what was the most important issue in economic life to Veblen, the growth of the industrial arts (as well as the pecuniary interests of business) in the preceding two centuries, marginal utility theory had, in Veblen’s view, been silent.
Basic Premises

In this section we deal with some of the basic premises of Veblen’s theory, including his ideas on human nature, the industrial arts, cultural lag, and cultural borrowing.

Human Nature

Veblen operated with a very strong sense of human nature and of its importance in social life. *Instincts* are at the core of his thinking about human nature (Ayres, 1958), and they are defined as “the innate and persistent propensities of human nature” (Veblen, 1922/1964:2). There are a number of such inherited human instincts. They all relate to the objective ends of human endeavors; in other words, instincts are teleological. In fact, instincts differ from one another on the basis of their ends or purposes. Another component of Veblen’s thinking on human nature is “tropismatic action.” Tropismatic action is seen as “automatic” behavior involving no conscious thought processes, as mere “physiological reflexes” (F. Hill, 1958:134). In contrast, instinctive action involves intelligence, or “consciousness and adaptation to an end aimed at” (Veblen, 1922/1964:4). With the ends of life defined instinctively, the ways and means to those ends are defined intelligently, socially, and culturally. The latter was especially important to Veblen. Over time, intelligently chosen means become traditional and part of the larger culture; they become habitual. Ultimately, they become institutionalized; they become conventional, consistent, and sanctioned by the larger culture. Thus, although Veblen based his thinking on instincts, they are inherently intertwined with larger social factors.

There are, in Veblen’s view, individual and racial differences in instincts. Here, he accorded an advantage to groups such as Europeans (and their colonies), which are composed of racially mixed, or “hybrid,” stocks. Because of racial homogeneity, “lower cultures” are at a disadvantage relative to Europeans. In terms of instincts, there is greater evolutionary adaptation on the part of the European “races” than is found in the lower cultures. This is because “the hybrid populations afford a greater scope and range of variation in their human nature than could be had within the limits of any pure-bred race” (Veblen, 1922/1964:23). Although Veblen saw only slight genetic differences between the races, those differences, he believed, could come to represent decisive differences as they worked themselves out over time. Thus, Veblen (1922/1964:24) accorded much importance to race, and “in the last resort any race is at the mercy of its instincts.”

Whereas race and attendant instincts are generally stable (although mutations are possible), the associated habitual elements of life, the social institutions, change continually. Although such changes are necessary, it is possible that social institutions will arise that are, as we have already seen, at variance with the demands of various instincts. Institutions that are at such variance are what Veblen often called “imbecile institutions.”
Thorstein Veblen: A Biographical Sketch

Thorstein Veblen was born in rural Wisconsin on July 30, 1857. His parents were farmers of Norwegian origin (K. McCormick, 2011). Thorstein was the sixth of twelve children. He was able to escape the farm and at the age of 17 began studying at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. Early in his schooling he demonstrated both the bitterness and the sense of humor that were to characterize his later work. He met his future first wife, the niece of the president of Carleton College, at the school (they eventually married in 1888). Veblen graduated in 1880 and obtained a teaching position, but the school soon closed and he went East to study philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. However, he failed to obtain a scholarship and moved on to Yale in the hopes of finding economic support for his studies. He managed to get by economically and obtained his Ph.D. from Yale in 1884. (One of his teachers at Yale was an early giant of sociology, William Graham Sumner.) However, in spite of strong letters of recommendation, he was unable to obtain a university position because, at least in part, of his agnosticism, his lack (at the time) of a professional reputation, and the fact that he was perceived as an immigrant lacking the polish needed to hold a university post. He was idle for the next few years (he attributed this idleness to ill health), but by 1891 he returned to his studies, this time focusing more on the social sciences at Cornell University. With the help of one of his professors of economics (A. Laurence Laughlin), who was moving to the University of Chicago, Veblen was able to become a fellow at that university in 1892. He did much of the editorial work associated with the Journal of Political Economy, one of the many new academic journals created during this period at Chicago. Veblen was a marginal figure at Chicago, but he did teach some courses and, more important, used the Journal of Political Economy as an outlet for his writings. His work also began to appear in other outlets, including the American Journal of Sociology, another of the University of Chicago’s new journals.

In 1899 he published his first and what became his best-known book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, but his position at Chicago remained tenuous. In fact, when he asked for a customary raise of a few hundred dollars, the university president made it clear that he would not be displeased if Veblen left the university. But the book received a great deal of attention and Veblen was eventually
promoted to the position of assistant professor. Whereas some students found his teaching inspiring, most found it abysmal. One of his Chicago students said that he was "an exceedingly queer fish…. Very commonly with his cheek in hand, or in some such position, he talked in a low, placid monotone, in itself a most uninteresting delivery and manner of conducting the class" (Dorfman, 1966:248–249). It was not unusual for him to begin a course with a large number of students who had heard of his growing fame, but for the class to dwindle to a few diehards by the end of the semester.

Veblen’s days at Chicago were numbered for various reasons, including the fact that his marriage was crumbling and he offended Victorian sentiments with affairs with other women. In 1906, Veblen took an associate professorship at Stanford University. Unlike the situation at Chicago, he taught mainly undergraduates at Stanford, and many of them were put off by his appearance (one said he looked like a "tramp") and his boring teaching style. Veblen's continual womanizing forced him to resign from Stanford in 1909 under circumstances that made it difficult for him to find another academic position. However, with the help of a colleague and friend who was the head of the Department of Economics at the University of Missouri, Veblen was able to obtain a position there in 1911. He also obtained a divorce in that year, and in 1914, he married a divorcée and former student.

Veblen's appointment at Missouri was at a lower rank (lecturer) and it paid less than the position at Stanford. In addition, he hated the then-small town, Columbia, Missouri, which was the home of the university (he reportedly called it a "woodpecker hole of a town" and the state a "rotten stump" [Dorfman, 1966:306]). However, it was during his stay at Missouri that another of his best-known books, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts* (1922/1964) appeared. Veblen's stormy academic career took another turn in 1917 when he moved to Washington, D.C., to work with a group commissioned by President Wilson to analyze possible peace settlements for World War I. After working for the U.S. Food Administration for a short time, Veblen moved to New York City to work as one of the editors of a magazine, *The Dial*. The magazine shifted its orientation and within a year Veblen lost his editorial position. In the interim he had become connected with the New School for Social Research. His pay there was comparatively high (a good portion of it contributed by one of his former students at Chicago) and because he lived frugally, the great critic of American business began investing his money, at first in raisin vineyards in California and later in the stock market.

Veblen returned to California in 1926 and by the next year was living in a town shack in northern California. His economic situation became a disaster as he lost the money he had invested in the raisin industry and his stocks became worthless. He continued to earn $500 to $600 a year from royalties, and his former Chicago student continued to send him $500 a year.

Veblen was, to put it mildly, an unusual man. For example, he could often sit for hours and contribute little or nothing to a conversation going on around him. His friends and admirers made it possible for him to become president of the American Economic Association, but he declined the offer. The following vignette offered by a bookseller gives a bit more sense of this complex man:

A man used to appear every six or eight weeks quite regularly, an ascetic, mysterious person … with a gentle air. He wore his hair long…. I used to try to interest him in economics … I even once tried to get him to begin with *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. I explained to him what a brilliant port of entry it is to social consciousness…. He listened attentively to all I said and melted like a snow drop through the door. One day he ordered a volume of Latin hymns. “I shall have to take your name because we will order this expressly for you,” I told him. “We shall not have an audience for such a book as this again in a long time, I am afraid.” “My name is Thorstein Veblen,” he breathed rather than said.

(Cited in Tilman, 1992:9–10)

Thorstein Veblen died on August 3, 1929, just before the Depression that many felt his work anticipated.

**Instinct of Workmanship**

The primary human instinct, and one that has a crucial place in Veblen’s thinking, is the instinct of workmanship. It involves the efficient use of available means and adequate management of available resources. It is concerned with “practical expedients, ways and means, devices and contrivances of efficiency and economy, proficiency, creative work, and technological mastery of facts … a proclivity for taking pains” (Veblen, 1922/1964:33). Although it sounds as if it deals with means, the instinct of workmanship, as well as
those things involved in it, is an end in its own right. This instinct is manifest at the micro level in terms of the technical efficiency of the individual worker and at the macro level in the technological proficiency and accomplishments of the community as a whole (the “industrial arts”). Although it is primary, the instinct of workmanship, like all instincts, must work itself out in a give-and-take with all other instincts. The instinct of workmanship is manifest throughout the social world in domains as diverse as the arts, religion, and law. In a way, this instinct relates to all ends because it is concerned with achieving ends in the best possible way.

As important as it is, the instinct of workmanship has certain weaknesses. For example, it does not have the tenacity of other instincts and is likely to yield to them. It is also relatively easy to bend this instinct to institutional developments of one kind or another. In lower cultures, there was little institutional development to adversely affect the instinct of workmanship, but in later cultures a more developed institutional system has a far more negative impact on that instinct. However, the most important obstruction to the instinct of workmanship comes, at least theoretically, from within the instinct itself in the form of animism. By this, Veblen meant the belief that inanimate objects are invested with souls and the ability to do things. More specifically, within the instinct of workmanship this involves “the sentimental propensity to impute workmanlike qualities and conduct to external facts” (Veblen, 1922/1964:80). One example might be the view that it is the “market” or the organization that accomplishes work rather than workers endowed with the instinct of workmanship. Such mystical views stand in contrast to the matter-of-factness that lies at the heart of the instinct of workmanship.

**Parental Bent**

The only instinct close to the instinct of workmanship in importance is the “parental bent,” and the two have much in common. The parental bent is defined as “an unselfish solicitude for the well-being of the incoming generation—a bias for the highest efficiency and fullest volume of life in the group” (Veblen, 1922/1964:46).

**Idle Curiosity**

Veblen (1922/1964:85) saw people as endowed with an instinctive curiosity, “an ‘idle’ curiosity by force of which men, more or less insistently, want to know things, when graver interests do not engage their attention.” Although it may be pushed to the background in the short run by more immediate needs such as food, in the long run it has led to our most important achievements in systematic knowledge. This instinct plays a central role in Veblen’s discussion of “higher learning” (Kaplan, 1958).

Veblen did not emphasize the fact that this curiosity is “hard-wired” in people, but rather focused on how it developed into ancient habits of thought that have persisted through centuries of existence and use. Especially important are the “habitual canons of knowledge and belief” through which people “construct those canons of conduct which serve as guide and standards in practical life” (Veblen, 1919/1964:6). As important as these habits of thinking are, they are constantly subject to revision as a result of changes in the material environment. This makes it clear, again, that Veblen was ultimately a materialist, believing that what shapes everything else is “the exigencies that beset men in their everyday dealings with the material means of life; inasmuch as these material facts are insistent and uncompromising” (9). The economy is one of the key
elements of material existence. As it changes, people’s habits of thought (also defined as social institutions) change, but social and cultural change is limited by “changeless native proclivities” (11). In fact, if habits of thought grow too far out of line with human nature, those ways of thinking will be modified so that they are in better alignment with human nature.

**Emulation**

Veblen related the instinct of workmanship to yet another of his instincts—emulation: “Men are moved by many impulses and driven by many instinctive dispositions. Among these abiding dispositions are a strong bent to admire and defer to persons of achievement and distinction, as well as a workmanlike disposition to find merit in any work that serves the common good” (Veblen, 1923:115). We say more about this instinct in our later discussion of conspicuous consumption and waste.

**The Industrial Arts**

The industrial arts, or technological knowledge, is “a common stock, held and carried forward collectively by the community, which is in this relation to be conceived as a going concern” (Veblen, 1922/1964:103). It is a historical product and it is continually changing. However, the new additions are slight in comparison to the total body handed down from the past. Veblen saw the industrial arts as a collective possession, and he offered a very contemporary sounding micro-macro model of its genesis:

> Each successive move in advance, every new wrinkle of novelty, improvement, invention, adaptation, every further detail of workmanlike innovation, is of course made by individuals and comes out of individual experience and initiative, since the generations of mankind live only in individuals. But each move so made is necessarily made by individuals immersed in the community and exposed to the discipline of group life as it runs in the community, since all life is necessarily group life…. Any new technological departure necessarily takes its rise in the workmanlike endeavours of given individuals, but it can do so only by force of their familiarity with the body of knowledge which the group already has in hand.

(Veblen, 1922/1964:104)

Just as the industrial arts of the collectivity could not exist without the contributions of individuals, individual workers would be helpless without access to that collective body of knowledge and skill.

The industrial efficiency of individual workers, as well as the community as a whole, is a function of the state of the industrial arts. Efficiency is apt to be high when the arts are well-developed, and it is likely to be low when they are underdeveloped.

As in many places in his work, race plays a role here. The state of industrial arts depends on the individual abilities of the worker, but the kind and the degree of the abilities of individuals in this regard vary among the races.
Cultural Lag

As we have already seen several times, Veblen operated with a theory of cultural lag, an idea that is usually associated more with William Fielding Ogburn (1922/1964). This concept is most notable in Veblen’s discussion of the advances in science and technology in the modern world and the resulting centrality of a matter-of-fact, mechanistic way of thinking. In fact, he saw this way of thinking, and its scientific and practical application, as the “main line of march for civilisation” (Veblen, 1919/1964:12). The “lag” occurs because “the system of law and custom, which governs the relations of men to one another and defines their mutual rights, obligations, advantages and disabilities” has tended to be “somewhat in arrears” (11–12). More specifically, Veblen argued, “The principles (habits of thought) which govern knowledge and belief, law and morals, have accordingly lagged behind, as contrasted with the forward drive in industry and in the resulting workday conditions of living” (1923:206). However, it was in his view only a matter of time until those systems of thought would be brought more into line with the matter-of-fact way of thinking predominant in science and technology.

Among the system of laws and customs, Veblen focused on the vested right of ownership and the time-honored principles that lie at its base. From his point of view, these vested rights have “become the focus of vexation and misery in the life of civilised peoples” (Veblen, 1919/1964:22). They have done so because they have lagged behind and put limits on the development of the industrial arts with its factories, mechanical equipment, standardized procedures and possession of the “accumulated technological wisdom of the community” (37). The expansion of the industrial arts has been accompanied by a change in ownership, with the personal employer-owner being progressively replaced by impersonal corporate capital. The problem is that those who possess such capital have come to gain control over the industrial arts at the same time that they have grown increasingly distant from, and less knowledgeable about, them. Thus, capital has come to be a barrier to the industrial arts and their further development. To put it another way, ownership and the ideas that lie at its base have tended to lag behind changes in the industrial arts and, given their position, they have had the ability to impede the operation and progress of the industrial arts. In sum, “twentieth-century technology has outgrown the eighteenth-century system of vested rights” (Veblen 1921:100).
Substantive Issues

A number of substantive issues lie at the core of Veblen’s thinking, including his theories of the leisure class, the inherent conflict between business and industry, higher learning, and politics.

Theory of the Leisure Class

Veblen’s first and best-known book, The Theory of the Leisure Class, was also his most important work. The book begins with an early variant of a distinction that, as we alluded to earlier (although in other terms) and will discuss more extensively later (under the heading “Business versus Industry”), informed his life work. He argued that activities fall into two classes in primitive society. First, there is industry (or “drudgery”), the “effort that goes to create a new thing, with a new purpose given it by the fashioning hand of its maker out of passive (‘brute’) material” (Veblen, 1899/1994:12). Then there is exploit, which involves “so far as it results in an outcome useful to the agent … the conversion to his own ends of energies previously directed to some other end by another agent” (12–13). An “invidious distinction” (a key phrase in Veblen’s work) is made between the two with employment involving exploit coming to be seen as “worthy, honourable, noble,” whereas that involving industry (or drudgery) is viewed as “unworthy, debasing, ignoble” (13). It is this distinction that lies at the root of the development of social classes.

Veblen explored the “psychological ground” of this invidious distinction, which he saw as rooted in a concept that, as we have seen, is fundamental to his work—the instinct of workmanship. He described this aptitude (or propensity) as follows: “man is an agent … seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end. By force of his being such an agent he is possessed of a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort. He has a sense of the merit of serviceability or efficiency and of the demerit of futility, waste, or incapacity” (Veblen, 1899/1994:13). Invidious comparisons tend to be made between people on the basis of their efficiency in doing work. As a result, people seek to make their efficiency visible to others so that they may gain esteem and be emulated by others. In peaceful barbarian societies this most often takes the form of gaining esteem on the basis of one’s industrial efficiency. Later, in more predatory societies, the focus shifts to exploit and to the demonstration of tangible evidence of prowess and aggression, such as booty and trophies. Obtaining these by force comes to be valued with the result that obtaining them by other methods, including industry, comes to be disesteemed. An invidious distinction is made between exploit and industry, and the latter comes to be seen as lacking in dignity and even irksome to perform.

Operating with an evolutionary model that, as we saw earlier, pervades all his work, Veblen argued that with the beginning of ownership there dawns a leisure class. The roots of ownership lie in the seizure of women as trophies, as demonstrations of male prowess. From there ownership extends to the products of industry. Most often, ownership of private property is traced to the need for subsistence, but although this may be true in earlier societies, in more contemporary societies the motive that lies at the base of owning and accumulating things is emulation. That is, private property is the basis of esteem and everyone else in society seeks to emulate, or even outdo, those who have a great deal of it. This is true of manual workers, but it is even truer in the higher reaches of the stratification system.
In an earlier era, wealth was seen as evidence of efficiency, of the instinct of workmanship. However, more recently, the possession of wealth itself has come to be seen as meritorious. The importance of how one acquired the wealth, whether or not one gained it on the basis of efficient industry, tends to fade from view. In fact, at a later stage, greater prestige is awarded to wealth obtained by inheritance than to that obtained by dint of a person’s own efforts. Self-esteem comes to be based on material possessions and whether one has as many, or (better) more, possessions than do those one considers one’s peers. Thus, emulation lies at the base of this desire for material goods. As a result, the desire for wealth can never be satisfied as it might be if it were driven by the need to subsist: “since the struggle is substantially a race for reputability on the basis of invidious comparison, no approach to a definitive attainment is possible” (Veblen, 1899/1994:32). Thus, the instinct of workmanship is transformed into an effort to outdo others in terms of the possession of the symbols of economic achievement.

Conspicuous Leisure

In the working class there persists, at least to some degree, a focus on work and an emulation of those who are good at what they do. However, this is not the case in the leisure, or superior pecuniary, class. Until the early industrial stage of development, the leisure class tends to demonstrate its wealth, and thereby gain esteem, by leading a life of leisure; by ostentatiously not working. Veblen called this conspicuous leisure. It is not that the leisure class is necessarily indolent or quiescent, but rather that it consumes time nonproductively because of a sense that productive work is unworthy. Such activity is also evidence of its ability to be able to afford to devote its life to idleness. The leisure class seeks to develop and present “evidence” that it has not been engaged in productive labor, and such evidence includes “the knowledge of dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic music and other household art; of the latest properties of dress, furniture, and equipage; of games, sports, and fancy-bred animals, such as dogs and race-horses” (Veblen, 1899/1994:45). Similar evidence comes from demonstrations of “manners and breeding, polite usage, decorum, and formal and ceremonial observances generally” (45–46). The leisure class is apt to employ servants who, because they produce nothing, also serve to demonstrate that time is being wasted in the care and maintenance of the master and his household and that the master has the ability to pay for such a waste of time. In addition, wives do the consumption for the master, further demonstrating his leisure and his ability to pay for it.

Conspicuous Consumption

As society evolves further, conspicuous consumption tends to replace conspicuous leisure among the leisure class. In modern societies the only practicable way of impressing large numbers of transient others is with abundantly obvious indicators of one’s ability to waste money, and consumer goods are more obvious than leisure activities. Both conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure involve waste. The latter involves the waste of time and the former, the waste of money. The leisure class is expected to consume not only a great deal, but also the best “in food, drink, narcotics, shelter, services, ornaments, apparel, weapons and accoutrements, amusements, amulets, and idols or divinities” (Veblen, 1899/1994:73). The members of the leisure class not only must consume these things, but must consume them in the “proper” manner, and they must become connoisseurs of them. Further, it is not enough to consume for oneself, but one must give
expensive presents and throw lavish parties.

Those in other social classes seek to emulate the conspicuous consumption (and leisure) of the leisure class. However, in the lower classes, the head of the household cannot afford not to work. The obligation then falls upon the wife to demonstrate conspicuous leisure by performing household tasks that indicate that it is not necessary for her to be gainfully employed. The housewife also tends to obtain those things that are signs of conspicuous consumption in this social class. She consumes such things in order to enhance the reputation of her spouse.

More generally, the leisure classes stand on the pinnacle of the stratification system and it is incumbent on all classes that rank below them, including even the very lowest classes, to emulate the way they live. However, the influence of the leisure class is not direct, except on the class immediately below it in the hierarchy. In Veblen’s view, each class tends to emulate the one in the stratum immediately above it. It is rare to compare oneself to those in strata that are far above or those that rank below. The ways that the leisure class lives and thinks ultimately determine the ways of life and modes of thought of the entire community. However, this effect takes place gradually over time as the process of emulation works its way through the stratification system. Thus, the leisure class cannot bring about an abrupt revolution that dramatically alters the way the community thinks and consumes.

To the degree that they can, all social classes engage in conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. Thus, Veblen contended, “no class of society, not even the abjectly poor, foregos all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away” (1899/1994:85).

**Waste**

Veblen made it clear that, although all social classes engage in waste, most people do not intentionally seek to waste money or time. Rather, they do so as a result of “a wish to conform to established usage, to avoid unfavourable notice and comment, to live up to the accepted canons of decency in the kind, amount, and grade of goods consumed, as well as in the decorous employment of … time and effort” (Veblen, 1899/1994:115).

It is not just that this principle of waste affects consumption; it affects habits of thought more generally, including “the sense of duty, the sense of beauty, the sense of utility, the sense of devotional or ritualistic fitness, and the scientific sense of truth” (Veblen, 1899/1994:116). Thus, for example, churches are constructed with an eye to demonstrating at least some degree of wasteful expenditure. Clerical clothing is often costly, ornate, and quite uncomfortable. Clerics are not expected to engage in work that is productive from an industrial point of view. Things that we consider to be beautiful tend also to be expensive; if they are not expensive, they are not likely to be deemed beautiful. We consider useless household pets like dogs beautiful, whereas the barnyard animals like hogs and cattle are useful and, as result, not considered beautiful. The dog comes under particular merciless (and humorous) attack: “He is the filthiest of the domestic animals
in his person and the nastiest in his habits. For this he makes up in servile, fawning attitude towards his
master, and a readiness to inflict damage and discomfort on all else … he is also an item of expense, and
commonly serves no industrial purpose" (Veblen, 1899/1994:141). Thus, it can easily be argued that we
conspicuously consume in the domestic animals we choose to purchase and maintain (to say nothing of the
way in which we maintain them). Veblen made a similar argument about fast horses, which are also expensive
to maintain; they are wasteful and useless, except in that they can be used to win races and thereby satisfy the
owner's need for aggression and dominance.

Veblen looks at female beauty in much the same way. For example, such beauty is associated with small hands
and a narrow waist. However, from the point of view of doing most types of productive work, these are
structural faults that "show that the person so affected is incapable of useful effort and must therefore be
supported in idleness by her owner. She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence
of pecuniary strength" (Veblen, 1899/1994:149). He made the same point about the propensity of the
Chinese to bind and mutilate women's feet. Similarly, clothing, especially women's clothing, is considered
desirable and beautiful if it demonstrates that the wearer is unable to work. The high heel is one example, as is
the skirt, which women persist in wearing even though "it is expensive and hampers the wearer at every turn
and incapacitates her for all useful exertion" (171). The corset is a "mutilation" that is "undergone for the
purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work" (172).

Veblen offered a hilarious discussion of our preference for handmade over industrially produced products. It is
clear that the industrial product is the more perfect product. Handmade products tend to be full of
imperfections and irregularities. The process of hand-making things is far more wasteful than making them
industrially. Nonetheless, we prefer the handmade product because it demonstrates more honorific waste.

Strikingly, Veblen went further to argue that we engage in conspicuous consumption not only in those things
that are seen publicly, but even in those things that are consumed in total privacy. Thus, the habit of mind
associated with conspicuous consumption has pervaded virtually every domain.

Other Characteristics

Veblen associated a number of other characteristics with the leisure class; these characteristics are modern
survivals of demonstrations of prowess in an earlier stage of barbarian society associated with a predatory
instinct and an animistic habit of mind. All of these have tended to outlive their usefulness.

- Religiosity is another characteristic of the leisure class and Veblen (1899/1994:295) saw the religious
temperament as related to sporting and gambling temperaments in that all involve "the belief in an
inscrutable propensity or a preternatural interposition in the sequence of events."
- A propensity to fight, duel, to have a martial spirit, to be patriotic. Here, as elsewhere, Veblen saw a
similarity between the frames of mind of the leisure class and lower-class delinquents. He saw this as a
case of "arrested spiritual development" that the industrial classes have, to a large degree, been able to
overcome.
- Sport, which is related to aggression, and is ultimately futile, or purposeless. In contrast, "the instinct of
workmanship demands purposeful action” (Veblen, 1899/1994:259) with the result that sporting activity is much more occasional among the industrial classes.

- Gambling is enjoyed by the leisure class because it involves a belief in luck and it offers the opportunity of gaining at the advantage of the loser. However, like everything else about the leisure class, it “is recognised to be a hindrance to the highest industrial efficiency” (Veblen, 1899/1994:276). The notion of luck stands in contradiction to the industrial concern with causal sequences.

Overall, the leisure class and its pecuniary orientation are associated with “waste, futility, and ferocity” (Veblen, 1899/1994:351). In encouraging such things, the leisure class tends to stand in opposition to the needs of modern, industrial society: “In this as in other relations, the institution of a leisure class acts to conserve, and even to rehabilitate, that archaic type of human nature and those elements of the archaic culture which the industrial evolution of society in its later stages acts to eliminate” (331).

Business versus Industry

In the course of his discussion of the leisure class, Veblen introduced the distinction between “business” and “industry” (see the preceding discussion of his model of social change) that informs virtually all his life’s work. To our way of thinking these terms seem closely related, but to Veblen there was a stark contrast, in fact an inherent conflict, between them: “The material interest of the underlying population [largely those associated with industry] is best served by maximum output at a low cost, while the business interests of the industry’s owners [“business”] may best be served by a moderate output at an enhanced price” (1923:10). Veblen (1923:249) takes the United States as the “exemplar” of the conflict between business and industry, as well as of the predominance of business.

Business

Veblen detailed a historic change in the nature of business and business leaders. The early leaders tended to be entrepreneurs who were designers, builders, shop managers, and financial managers. They were more likely to have earned their income because, at least in part, it was derived from their direct contribution to production (industry). Today’s business leaders are almost exclusively concerned with financial matters, and therefore, at least in Veblen’s view, they are not earning their income since finance makes no direct contribution to industry. (In fact, if anything, as we will see, finance inhibits industry rather than enhancing it.) A further development involved the routinization of financial matters and the resulting handling of them by large financial organizations (e.g., investment bankers). As a result, the business leader is left as an intermediary between industry and finance, with little concrete knowledge of either one.

Business tends to define the world of Veblen’s day, especially the interests of the upper classes. A business orientation is defined by a pecuniary approach to economic processes; that is, the dominant interest is money. The focus is not on the interest of the larger community but rather on the profitability of the organization. Relatedly, it is oriented to acquisition, not production, and it serves the interest of invidious rather than noninvidious interests. The occupations of those with a business interest tend to relate to ownership and acquisition. It is the leisure class that tends to occupy these positions. Thus, the “captains of industry” as well
as the “captains of solvency” (the investment bankers, financiers who come eventually to control the captains of industry) have a business orientation. Because it is nonproductive, Veblen saw a business orientation as parasitic and exploitative: “the chances are that the owner has contributed less than his per-capita quota, if anything, to that common fund of knowledge on the product of which he draws by virtue of his ownership, because he is likely to be fully occupied with other things,—such things as lucrative business transaction, e.g., or the decent consumption of superfluities” (Veblen, 1919/1964:69). Instead of production, business leaders focus on “sharp practice,” “cornering the market,” and “sitting tight” (Veblen, 1923:34). He saw such a system as a holdover from earlier, predatory societies and one that is not well adapted to the new realities.

Veblen gave the business leader credit for increasing productive capacity, but as we will see, Veblen’s (1904) most distinctive contribution here is to see such leaders as being at least as much involved in “disturbing” production and in restricting capacity as they are in increasing it. Veblen associated business leaders not only with the waste of material resources, equipment, and manpower as a result of the restriction of capacity, but with other ills as well. Businesspeople are responsible for the unproductive and wasteful expansion of “salesmanship” and the attendant sales costs that are passed on to the consumer. Veblen (1923:78) saw salesmanship as meaning “little else than prevarication.” In addition, Veblen attributed to businesspeople the production of unnecessary and useless products and the dislocation of industrial processes through sabotage.

Veblen saw the modern corporation as a type of business. As such, its interests are in financial matters like profit and in sales and not in production and workmanship. As he put it, “the corporation is always a business concern, not an industrial appliance. It is a means of making money, not of making goods” (Veblen, 1923:85).

Industry

Industry has to do with “the apprehension and coordination of mechanical facts and sequences, and to their appreciation and utilisation for the purposes of human life” (Veblen, 1899/1994:232). An industrial orientation is associated with those involved in workmanship and production. It is the working classes that are most likely to be involved in these activities and to have such an orientation. Unlike business’s pecuniary orientation, which leads to a personal standpoint, the industrial orientation leads to an “impersonal standpoint, of sequence, quantitative relations, mechanical efficiency, or use” (239).

Unfortunately, industry is controlled by the captains of industry who have little or no understanding of it and only understand the “higgling of the market” and “financial intrigue” (Veblen, 1919/1964:89). In fact, the main interest of those leaders is to restrict production—restrict the free operation of the industrial system—in order to keep prices (and therefore profits) high. The result is that the main task of the business leader to Veblen is to obstruct, retard, and sabotage the operation of the industrial system. Without such obstructions, the extraordinary productivity of the industrial system would drive prices and profits progressively lower.

Veblen also calls those associated with a business orientation “vested interests,” or those with the “marketable right to get something for nothing” (Veblen, 1919/1964:100). While they may be getting something for nothing, they cost the larger society a great deal. These costs stem from three business activities aimed at increasing profit—limitation of the supply of products, obstruction of their traffic, and publicity. All these are
aimed at salesmanship, not workmanship. They add nothing to production and, as a result, are viewed by Veblen as waste. He argued that although it may benefit the pecuniary interests of the captains of industry, the work that salesmen and accountants perform “is, on the whole, useless or detrimental to the community at large” (Veblen, 1904:63). To the costs associated with these activities, Veblen added illegal business activities such as fraud. Not only are the captains of industry parasites, but Veblen (1904:64) described entire industries—advertising, military equipment, and those involved in “turning out goods for conspicuously wasteful consumption”—as parasitic.

The increasingly tightly interlocking industrial system lends itself to cooperative undertakings, but this characteristic makes it increasingly vulnerable to the efforts of business and national leaders to sabotage it. This may be done consciously or as a result of the business leader’s increasing ignorance of industrial operations (Veblen [1921:64] writes of the “one-eyed captains of industry”). In either case, it results in hardship to the community in the form of unemployment, idle factories, and wasted resources. Veblen (1904:213–214) even went so far as to imply that business leaders are consciously responsible for depressions; they reduce production because under certain market conditions they feel they cannot derive what they emotionally consider to be a “reasonable” profit from their goods.

Industrial depression means that the business men engaged do not see their way to derive a satisfactory gain from letting the industrial process go forward on the lines and in the volume for which the material equipment of industry is designed. It is not worth their while, and it might even work them pecuniary harm. Commonly their apprehension of the discrepancy which forbids an aggressive pursuit of industrial business is expressed by the phrase “overproduction.”

(Veblen, 1904:213–214)

To Veblen, from the point of view of the larger community, there is no such thing as overproduction. However, even with the activities of the business leaders, including the creation of depressions, the industrial system is still so effective and efficient that it allows business leaders and their investors to make huge profits.

**Free Income**

The modern industrial system—“mechanical, specialised, standardised, drawn on a large scale”—is highly productive. In fact, it is so productive that it yields returns far beyond those required to cover costs and to give reasonable returns to owners and investors. These additional returns are the source of what Veblen called “free income.” Most generally, free income is that “income for which no equivalent in useful work is given” (Veblen, 1923:126). This free income is attributed by business leaders to intangible assets of the firm such as possession of a trade secret, a trademark, a patent, and a monopoly. The problem is that these intangibles produce nothing. Rather, the free income that goes to the captains of industry and their investors is the result of the constraints that these intangible assets place on the free operation of the industrial system. In addition to harming industrial efficiency, these intangibles also adversely affect the entire community because far less is produced than could be. Veblen (1919/1964:76) saw an analogy between the operations of business leaders
and “blackmail, ransom, and any similar enterprise that aims to get something for nothing.”

The free income earned by the captains of industry has been capitalized by the firm and this results in pressure on the firm to keep prices and profits high.

Capitalization of the firm is no longer just the cost of the plant, but also the “good will” of the organization including “established customary business relations, reputation for upright dealing, franchises and privileges, trade-marks, brands, patent rights, copyrights, exclusive use of special processes guarded by law or by secrecy, exclusive control of particular sources of materials” (Veblen, 1904:139). The problem with all of these things is that they “give a differential advantage to their owners, but they are of no aggregate advantage to the community. They are wealth to the individuals concerned—differential wealth; but they make no part of the wealth of nations” (Veblen, 1904:139–140).

The Price System

Veblen traced many of the problems within the economy to the operation of the price system. For example, he argued that the nature of the price system and the need to maintain prices so that a reasonable profit may be earned and business recession prevented make it necessary for the captains of industry to sabotage production through “peaceable or surreptitious restriction, delay, withdrawal, or obstruction” (Veblen, 1921:4). The “problem,” again, is that the industrial system is so productive that business leaders must sabotage it to some degree or else prices and profits will plunge.

Veblen saw the relationship between the price system and business leaders in much the same way that Marx saw the relationship between the capitalist system and the capitalists. That is, both were seen as structures that were constraining on actors. Thus, in Veblen’s case, even if a business leader wanted to ignore profits and concentrate on producing more goods so that the larger community might benefit, that business leader would quickly be pushed to the brink of bankruptcy. More generally, Veblen (1921:14) saw businesspeople as “creatures and agents” of the price system.

Who Should Be in Charge?

In Veblen’s view, the industrial system should be run by “production engineers” (industrial experts, skilled technologists, etc.), but because business leaders do not understand them, they have been employed “only reluctantly, tardily, sparingly, and with shrewd circumspection” (Veblen, 1921:64). The industrial system forms an interlocking network that not only is vulnerable to the meddling of business leaders, but requires production engineers throughout the system to work together, or at least not to work at cross-purposes. In this sense, it is in the interest of companies, communities, and even nations to work together to enhance the operation of the industrial system to their mutual benefit. As Veblen (1921:52) put it, “In point of material welfare, all the civilized peoples have been drawn together by the state of the industrial arts into a single going concern.” Of course, such a view is anathema to the vested interests in specific companies and nations. Thus, Veblen believed that control should be wrested away from these vested interests and put in the hands of the engineers who are presumed to be interested solely in increasing the efficiency of industry. Here, Veblen was operating with the questionable view that engineers have no personal, professional, or commercial biases that
will, themselves, have a negative effect on industry.

Employing Marxian terminology, Veblen (1921:71) argued that “these technologists have begun to become uneasily ‘class-conscious.’” They are recognizing both their indispensability and the waste that exists under the regime of the captains of industry. It is these technologists who can become the solution to the problem created by the opposition between business and industry. Thus, Veblen, unlike Marx, saw no hope in the working class, especially in representatives such as the American Federation of Labor (although workers might well follow the leadership of a revolution undertaken by the technologists). The technologists have a common purpose, the elimination of the pervasive confusion, obstructionism, and wastefulness that is so characteristic of a business orientation. And they have the possibility of coming together to accomplish this end: “So slight are their numbers, and so sharply defined and homogeneous is their class, that a sufficiently compact and inclusive organization of their forces should arrange itself almost as a matter of course, so soon as any appreciable proportion of them shall be moved by any common purpose” (Veblen, 1921:80). Veblen was optimistic about their chances of success: “a general strike of the technological specialists in industry need involve no more than a minute fraction of one percent of the population; yet it would swiftly bring a collapse of the old order and sweep the timeworn fabric of finance and absentee sabotage into the discard for good and all” (82).

Veblen deemed the Russian Revolution reasonably successful, and taking it at least in part as a model, he discussed a “Soviet of technicians,” although he felt that the opposition of business leaders made such a development highly unlikely (Veblen, 1921:134). Such a soviet would include technical people from productive industry, transportation, and distribution, as well as consulting “production economists,” but there would be no place in it for the current business leaders or even those trained in business. In spite of hopeful comments about a general strike of technologists, Veblen saw no immediate possibility of a revolution led by such soviets, especially because vested interests opposed it, there was no evidence that technologists wanted it, and, in any case, the mind-set of the American public was to prefer businesspeople as leaders and to distrust technicians.

The Impact of Industry and the Machine on Society

Veblen (1904:323) saw the machine and its ubiquity as the “unequivocal mark of the Western culture of today as contrasted with the culture of other times and places.” As such, it has a powerful impact on other institutions in society, such as the state, law, and “matter-of-fact” science, which come to operate in a machinelike manner. Machines affect all classes, although their most direct impact is on those who work most directly with them. Most generally, the machine affects the habits of thought, the ways of thinking, within society as a whole. And Veblen (1904:372–373) saw this as spreading:

...
cumulatively accelerating rate.

(Veblen, 1904:372–373)

The only thing that can impede its spread is some other cultural factor such as business interests, which may, as we have seen, at times see the proliferation of industry and the machine as contrary to its pecuniary interests. However, in the long run Veblen (1904) was certain that the machine and industry would win out. One of the reasons that the machine process and industry would emerge victorious is that “it touches larger classes of the community and inculcates its characteristic habits of thought more unremittingly” (Veblen, 1904:381).

**Trained Incapacity**

The idea of “trained incapacity” plays a minor role in Veblen’s work, but it has received an inordinate amount of attention from sociologists and other social scientists. One of the places that Veblen (1919/1964) raised it was in the context of a discussion of the role played by owners, bankers, and workers in modern industry. His basic point is that all of these focus, in their own way, on pecuniary matters, with the result that the most important task—the efficient and effective operation of industry—suffers. As Veblen (1919/1964:347) put it, the problems of modern industry are at least in part traceable to the “trained incapacity on the part of the several contestants to appreciate large and general requirements of the industrial situation.” In being socialized to look after their own interests, the members of each of these groups are unable to understand the larger picture and especially what is of utmost importance in the modern world. The phrase “trained incapacity” is now often used more generally to describe any situation in which a particular type of training serves to incapacitate, at least in some way, those who have undergone such socialization.

**Politics**

Veblen tended to approach politics in much the same way he did the economy. The reason for this, at least in part, is that political leaders were seen as being the tools of the “vested interests” and the “captains of industry.” He saw the national government as being “charged with the general care of the country’s business interests” (Veblen, 1921:19). He viewed the nation with its legal and military powers negatively as something that was needed by business “to enforce the claims of its business men abroad” (Veblen, 1919/1964:155). The warlike nature of relationships between businesses is reflected in warlike relationships between nations. According to Veblen (1904:398), “The quest of profits leads to a predatory national policy.”

Although the nation may be operated in the interest of business, it retards industry that is inherently international in scope. National boundaries serve only to retard international industrial exchanges and the international development of industrial processes. Tariffs are a specific example of a national act that operates against the interests of industry, which require free passage in order to operate most effectively. Thus, tariffs are an example of “sabotage,” this time being practiced at the level of the nation rather than the business enterprise. Nations are oriented to self-aggrandizement and stand in opposition to the principle of “live and let live” that Veblen thought should govern international (and all other) relationships. Like businesses, nations
operate with what they perceive to be the right “to seek their own advantage at the cost of the rest” (Veblen, 1919/1964:120). Thus, the nation is “a predatory organism, in practical effect an association of persons moved by a community interest in getting something for nothing by force and fraud” (Veblen, 1923:442). Wars are fought and nations engage in imperialism in order to strengthen their own positions and fortify the economic positions of their business interests.
Criticisms and Contemporary Applications

Thorstein Veblen has been the subject of more than his share of criticisms. Rick Tilman (1992) demonstrated that Veblen’s work has been attacked from a wide range of positions on the political spectrum—conservative (e.g., business is more important than Veblen indicated), liberal (he was too radical a critic of modern society), and radical (Veblen underestimated the importance of the working class). More generally, Veblen has been criticized for his pessimism and for his tendency to criticize contemporary society without offering a blueprint for an alternative society (Dowd, 1966). Among other major criticisms are his adoption of an outmoded evolutionary perspective, a lack of clarity, a tendency to conceal his true views and motivations (often behind irony), a need to be humorous (which served to alienate the serious audience for his work), his technological determinism (given the centrality of the industrial arts dominated by technology), and his technical elitism (as reflected in his thinking on a soviet of engineers).

In spite of these and many other criticisms, Veblen’s legacy continues and is even growing with the increasing relevance of his work to consumer society. In particular, as Juliet Schor (2007) pointed out, the concept of conspicuous consumption has grown in relevance through the 1980s and 1990s. This is a result of “dramatic increases in the concentration of income and wealth” and the subsequent emergence of “booming markets for high-end items” like “watches, jewelery, designer clothing, automobiles, yachts … expensive hotel suites, weddings and other private parties, elaborate mansions, and private airplanes” (Schor, 2007:685). People’s desire to distinguish themselves through the purchase and display of expensive consumer objects is further fuelled by the emergence of a celebrity culture in which celebrity figures such as film and music stars “define thought and conduct, style and manner” oftentimes through consumer objects (Cashmore, 2007:417).

Veblen’s ideas have also been influential in the development of the field of “leisure studies” (Rojek, 1995). Leisure is an important component of the contemporary consumer society. It is usually contrasted with work and allows people time to relax and pursue personal interests such as video gaming (Niman, 2013). Veblen, as might be expected, viewed leisure critically: it is a counter-productive and wasteful activity pursued by the bourgeoisie to highlight their wealth and freedom. In the contemporary consumer culture, leisure activity is no longer limited to the bourgeoisie class, but is undertaken by people across the social spectrum. Nevertheless, as Chris Rojek pointed out, Veblen’s critique remains relevant: “Much of the moral force of his argument stems from his radical insistence that general leisure wants are superficial and the leisure forms that develop around them corrode the human spirit” (1995:74). This said, while Veblen provided a powerful critique of empty consumerism, he did not allow for the possibility that leisure activities can also be the basis for meaningful, enriching social relations. As Sheila Scraton (2007:2588) pointed out, leisure is not only about relaxation but it also allows for the “broadening of knowledge” and novel forms of “social participation,” for example, book clubs. Is leisure always wasteful? How do we define waste? Can leisure lead to meaningful self and social development not imagined by Veblen?

Not surprisingly, given his emphasis on the immorality of wastefulness, some have also described Veblen as a “pioneer of environmental sociology” (Ross, 2001). While Veblen’s early writing on the leisure class and conspicuous consumption are relevant to environment sociology, Mitchell Ross (2001) pointed out that
Veblen's last book *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (1923) is particularly important. In that book Veblen analyzed “absentee owners, wasteful natural resource extraction, and rapid deterioration of the productive land base” (Ross, 2001:394). He is critical of absentee business owners who exploit and destroy land that they do not own or inhabit. In particular, he wrote about the wasteful extraction of coal, iron, and oil and was critical of the lumber business and the widespread destruction of forests in America. Veblen, Ross (2001:396) pointed out, was “an early advocate of sound forestry stewardship.” In the end though, Veblen was not critical of the widespread use of these natural resources, but rather the mismanagement of resources by business leaders. The point is that natural resources should not be used to satisfy the profit interest of business or the market for luxury goods. Instead, Veblen argued, resources should always be used to serve a productive purpose. To this end he advocated the “sustainable use of natural resources for the enjoyment of future generations” (Ross, 2001:399).
Summary

Thorstein Veblen’s ideas were shaped, both positively and negatively, by a variety of theoretical inputs, especially those from evolutionary theory, Marxian theory, and economics. Much of his theory is based on a series of assumptions about human nature, especially the instinct of workmanship, the parental bent, idle curiosity, and emulation. Although such instincts are important, they are shaped and affected by larger social and cultural factors. Also basic to his theory is the notion of industrial arts, or the stock of knowledge, especially technology, that is common to the community. He operated with the view that there is a tendency for cultural lag, with changes in law and custom particularly likely to lag behind changes in the industrial arts.

The theory of the leisure class is undoubtedly Veblen’s first and most lasting contribution to contemporary social theory. Particularly notable is his thinking on invidious distinctions, emulation, and conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption. Although best known today for that theory, Veblen was most concerned throughout much of his career with the conflict between business and industry. Industry was capable of almost unlimited production in the modern world and this high level of productivity would greatly benefit the entire community. However, the resulting flood of goods would serve to lower prices and profits. As a result, it is in the interest of business, indeed it is necessary for business, given the price system, to sabotage industry so that it is not nearly as productive as it could be. Much else that business does relates to salesmanship rather than workmanship and in that sense not only contributes nothing to the common welfare, but is a drag on it.

Because it contributes nothing to industry, business obtains “free income” and that income is attributed to, and is capitalized in the firm as, such nonmaterial assets as “good will.” Once capitalized, things like good will become a liability against the firm, which can be met only by keeping the income and profits high, and that is done by sabotaging industry. Veblen argued for a system run not by business leaders but also by engineers who understand the way industry really works. In any case, because they would not be dominated by the profit motive, engineers would have no interest in undermining industry. Industry and the machine technology have a wide range of effects on society, including the matter-of-fact way in which people in general, and scientists in particular, think.

Veblen’s thinking about politics is affected by the business–industry conflict. Business seeks to control the state and to use the state to sabotage (by tariffs, e.g.) the free trade between nations. This adversely affects industry around the world as well as the lives of people in the affected nations. Nations themselves, as well as the politicians that lead them, develop a similar interest in self-aggrandizement (e.g., nationalism) that adversely affects international industrial processes.
Notes

1. Paul Sweezy (1958:180), among others, disagreed, arguing that “the Veblenian framework is fundamentally Marxian.”

2. Veblen claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that he was not using this term in a negative sense. Rather, he contended that he was using it “in a technical sense as describing a comparison of persons with a view to rating and grading them in respect of relative worth or value—in an aesthetic or moral sense—and so awarding and defining the relative degrees of complacency with which they may legitimately be contemplated by themselves and by others. An invidious comparison is a process of valuation of persons in respect of worth” (Veblen, 1899/1994:34).

3. In another disingenuous aside, Veblen (1899/1994:97–98) claimed that he was not using the term waste in a negative sense as illegitimate or to deprecate the ends or motives of the consumer. Rather, he used waste “technically” as expenditures that do “not serve human life or human well-being on the whole.” However, he quickly added that from the everyday perspective of the instinct of workmanship such waste is deprecated.

4. Another term favored by Veblen (1923), especially in his later writings, was absentee ownership.

5. Veblen also saw most labor unions, especially the American Federation of Labor, as engaged in such sabotage.

6. David Riesman (1953/1995) argued that one of the ways to look at the basic conflict in Veblen’s work is the conflict between workmanship and wastemanship.

7. It is this that led Veblen (1904:241) to argue: “Depression is primarily a malady of the affections of the business men.”
13 Joseph Schumpeter*

*This chapter is coauthored by Craig Lair.
Like Karl Marx (Chapter 6) and Thorstein Veblen (Chapter 12), Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) was long thought of as an economist. However, also like those predecessors, Schumpeter has over the years come to be less accepted in economics but to have developed a wider audience in sociology. His economic theories (especially his famous idea of creative destruction) have great relevance to sociology, and later in his career he moved explicitly in the direction of making his theories more sociological. As a result, he has attracted increasing attention from sociologists, especially those associated with the growing field of economic sociology (Swedberg, 1993). It is also the case that Schumpeter’s thinking has much in common with the work of perhaps the two most important thinkers in the history of sociology: Marx and Max Weber (Chapter 8). He even taught a course at Harvard with another eminent classical sociological theorist, Talcott Parsons (Chapter 17).
Creative Destruction

Schumpeter’s most famous idea is creative destruction, which he introduced in one of his later books, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942) (McCraw, 2007:351). He used this concept to highlight the process by which capitalism continuously revolutionizes itself as new products and business processes are created that render obsolete (i.e., destroy) those that exist (Schumpeter, 1942/1976). Examples include the creation of the automobile industry leading to the destruction of the horse and buggy, as well as the destruction of the typewriter industry with the advent of the personal computer (PC). For Schumpeter, this process of creative destruction is “the essential fact about capitalism” as waves of creation and destruction are constantly sweeping over the economy. The result of this “perennial gale” of creative destruction is that capitalism is a highly dynamic and revolutionary system where “any existing structures and all the conditions of doing business are always in a process of change” (Schumpeter, 1942/1976:31). In other words, the “capitalist economy is not and cannot be stationary” because the process of creative destruction is constantly changing it (31).

Two important aspects of the dynamic of creative destruction need to be emphasized. The first is that the source of creative destruction comes from within the economic system itself. Entrepreneurs and businesses create new goods, technologies, organizations, and practices that replace, and destroy, that which already exists. Although Schumpeter (1942/1976:82) acknowledged that various non-economic (i.e., climatological, demographic, sociological) factors such as global warming, population growth, and social conflict can, to a degree, affect economic operations, these are not the “prime movers” of capitalism. This is a very important point for Schumpeter because one of his goals, at least early in his career, was to create a purely economic theory of economic development and change (this, as we will see, was to change later in his career).

The second aspect of creative destruction is that the type of change involved in the process of creative destruction is qualitative in nature. Schumpeter’s prime concern was not with minor, quantitative, or incremental changes to products or economic processes already in place (e.g., how the creation of a computer that is ten percent faster than those already in existence might affect business operations). Rather, he was much more interested in how the computer, as an entirely new and different product, affected existing products (e.g., the typewriter) and business operations. The type of change that Schumpeter (1911/2007:64) had in mind can be seen in one of his most famous lines: “Add successively as many mail coaches as you please, you will never get a railway thereby.” This also implies that the changes brought about by processes of creative destruction do not take place in a linear or orderly fashion as existing organizations adapt to changing conditions in an incremental manner. Rather, the history of capitalism is a “history of revolutions” spurred by waves of economic creation and littered with the remains of economic destruction.

Even though Schumpeter is generally credited with the concept of creative destruction, “the idea that the birth of something new is founded on the destruction of previous existence” goes back to the origins of human civilization (Reinert and Reinert, 2006). Examples include the Egyptian and Greek myth of the Phoenix, the Hindu view that “creation is always re-creation … part of a cycle that has no beginning and no end” (D. Rosenberg, 1994:327), and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea that “man” becomes something new,
different, and better only by going beyond himself (Nietzsche, 1908/2007:76). Schumpeter was not even the first to introduce the idea of creative destruction into economics. Rather, it was the German economist (and sociologist) Werner Sombart who linked the destruction of forests in Europe to the development of a “creative spirit” that eventually led to the development of nineteenth-century capitalism (Reinert and Reinert, 2006:72).

The idea of creative destruction is also evident in the work of Karl Marx, who had a profound, though unlikely, influence upon Schumpeter’s thinking. As Schumpeter (1942/1976:32) noted, “Marx saw this [dynamic] process of industrial change more clearly and he realized its pivotal importance more fully than any other economist of his time.” He gave Marx credit for recognizing the dynamic nature of economic development. Marx’s views on this are best captured in The Communist Manifesto, in which he described the dynamic, world-changing nature of capitalism with the phrase “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx and Engels, 1848/1969:38). However, Schumpeter also thought that Marx did not take the implications of capitalism’s dynamism far enough. Marshall Berman (1982:99) has expanded upon this theme arguing that all the concrete achievements of capitalism “are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms.”

Although the idea of creative destruction is not original to Schumpeter, he brought the concept to academic (and popular) attention and it was his thinking on it that had the most profound effect on later thinking in the area. The concept also represents the crystallization and culmination of the most important and most unique elements of Schumpeter’s thoughts on economic development and change. As Esben Andersen (2004:1) noted, though Schumpeter only used this term explicitly in a very limited fashion, this “expression could have been used throughout his work” because it “clearly reflects core elements of Schumpeter’s vision of economic evolution.”

Perhaps the best sense of what Schumpeter meant by creative destruction can be gleaned from his view of it as involving the process of industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term—that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in.

(Schumpeter, 1942/1976:83)

Thus, capitalism would not exist without creative destruction; capitalism would simply not be capitalism without creative destruction. This means that the system must be allowed to evolve on its own (contra the Keynesian view that government involvement in the economy is necessary at times, a view that continues to have many adherents to this day). In short, Schumpeter thought that capitalism, through the process of creative destruction, was dynamic enough to manage its own problems.
To Schumpeter, creative destruction is a generally positive phenomenon producing many beneficial economic (e.g., a higher standard of living) and non-economic (e.g., modern culture) outcomes. As Schumpeter (1942/1976:125) put it, “not only the modern mechanized plant and the volume of the output that pours from it, not only modern technology and economic organization, but all the features and achievements of modern civilization are, directly or indirectly, the products of the capitalist process.” In addition, the destruction of the old is viewed as a positive development because it is seen as standing in the way of the creation of the new and must therefore be destroyed in order to make room for the new (Baumol, 2001:21).

The concept of creative destruction becomes somewhat clearer when it is placed within the broader context of Schumpeter’s thinking on capitalism. The basic logic of his argument is as follows:

- Following Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and others (and contra Marx), capitalism is seen as a desirable system (though this did not deter Schumpeter from serving as an economic advisor in a communist government and seeming to prophesize capitalism’s downfall to socialism).
- Creative destruction is a positive process; that is, to move forward, to progress, capitalism must engage in creative destruction.
- Progress means invention and innovation, the creation of the “new.”
- Invention, innovation, the new, creative destruction, and ultimately capitalism are threatened in various ways, especially by rationalization.
- All of this is encompassed by a broad view of capitalism as a system that is constantly in motion and ever-changing. Contrary to the views of most economists, to Schumpeter capitalism cannot be stable, stationary, in equilibrium.
Born and educated in Austria-Hungary, Joseph Schumpeter’s life was filled with a mixture of success, paradox, and tragedy. He received his Ph.D. in 1906 from the University of Vienna and, after practicing law in Egypt for a year, earned early success as a promising young economist. However, his academic career was interrupted by World War I. After the war, he served as minister of finance in Austria’s only socialist government between World War I and World War II, and later became president of a bank. However, by 1924 that bank collapsed when the Vienna stock market crashed, bankrupting Schumpeter. In spite of this personal disaster, Schumpeter gained invaluable practical insight into capitalism and its ever-present “gales.” He gained a position at the University of Bonn (Germany) in 1925 and began visiting Harvard in the late 1920s. With the rise of Nazism in Germany, he moved to Harvard on a permanent basis in 1932. He taught there until his death in 1950.

Schumpeter carried himself in an aristocratic manner with much time and effort devoted to his appearance and dress (he told the wife of one colleague that it took him an hour to get dressed in the morning) (R. Allen, 1991a:134). He also liked to tell his students that as a young man he had three ambitions in life: to be the world’s greatest economist, the world’s greatest horseman, and the world’s greatest lover (Swedberg, 1991a:12). Schumpeter’s personal life was also filled with tragedy. It appears that Schumpeter had two great loves in his life. The first was his mother, who doted on him and took great pains to ensure that he had a proper upbringing even to the point of marrying a minor noble to ensure that Schumpeter could attend the best schools (R. Allen, 1991a:18). The other was his second wife whom Schumpeter married in 1925. In June 1926 Schumpeter’s mother died; in August of the same year, his wife and son died during childbirth. Although Schumpeter was able to recover from these tragedies, he often characterized his life as one of peace but not joy (R. Allen, 1991b). In the fall of 1926 he began recopying his dead wife’s diary, eventually inserting his own comments and contemporary thoughts into it. Schumpeter also began to elevate his dead wife and mother into his own personal deities from whom he would ask for advice and protection (R. Allen, 1991a:225–229).

Known primarily as an economist, Schumpeter was a multidisciplinary thinker who “knew that law, mathematics, and history...
mattered mightily, as did the newer fields of sociology, psychology, and political science” (McCraw, 2007:55; italics added). Integrating insights from various disciplines, and focusing on the big economic issues of his day, Schumpeter, like many of the other theorists dealt with in this book, "was following a long European tradition aimed at constructing grand social theory” (McCraw, 2007:156).
Schumpeter’s Broader Economic Theory

Schumpeter’s thinking on creative destruction is embedded in his theories of capitalism, and both are part of his broader work in economics; he devoted a great deal of his life to defining and advancing this discipline. In the history of economic thinking, Schumpeter undoubtedly offered one of the boldest and most innovative visions of how the economy operates. This vision was formed early, and a significant portion of his later career was devoted to working out and refining the implications of his views on economics (R. Allen, 1991a:51–52). The strongest and most unique elements of Schumpeter’s thinking on economics are his theory of economic development and the distinction between static and dynamic economics, which Swedberg (1991b:29) argued “is absolutely crucial to [Schumpeter’s] whole economic theory.”

For Schumpeter (1911/2007:63), economic development refers to “changes in economic life as are not forced upon it from without but arise by its own initiative, from within.” In other words, it refers to situations where forces internal to the economy cause it to change. The problem for Schumpeter was that most economic thought offered no mechanism to account for economic development in this sense and, as such, could only view the economy as adapting to external influences (e.g., to a declaration of war or to a substantial increase in population). Schumpeter (1939:14) attributed this to the static conception of economic operations that he saw at the foundation of most economic thought. Given the importance of this conception in the history of economic thought, Schumpeter took great pains to lay bare the fundamental propositions of static economics not only to evaluate their strengths and limitations but also to contrast them with his very different vision of the economics.

Static economics has a number of distinguishing features. The first is that static economics “considers economic phenomena, essentially and as a matter of principle, without taking into account their variations in time” (Kondratieff, 1925:576; emphasis in original). It seeks to understand economic relations at a specific point in time without regard to how these conditions might change over time. The classic example of this type of analysis is supply and demand since “it relates demand, supply, and price as they are supposed to be at any moment of observation” and with “nothing else [being] taken into consideration” (Schumpeter, 1954/1994:963). Not taken into consideration is how these variables might change as a result of future developments in the economy (e.g., because of major social changes, the supply and demand curve for horse and buggies today looks very different than it did in the 1800s).

It should be noted that the word static is not meant to imply a situation where all economic activity is frozen and unmoving (i.e., a state where economic agents do not act), but rather one where the pattern of economic activity is assumed to remain the same over time. Schumpeter considered the human circulatory system as an example of a static system. Although blood is continually flowing through this system, the pathways through which the blood moves are fixed. In a similar manner, static economics assumes that the pattern of the actions of economic agents (e.g., what, how, and how much they produce and consume) remains essentially the same over time. This does not mean that this method of analysis necessarily assumes that the economy is always the same or that it precludes all forms of economic change; it does allow for certain forms of economic change. However, they are not the ones Schumpeter thought were important in accounting for economic development.
One type of change of concern in static economics involves continuous processes that unfold in a more or less uniform manner over time (e.g., the economy increasing by a certain percentage each year). Schumpeter (1911/2007) did not consider such changes to be significant since they require only an “adaptive response” on the part of the economy. That is, they do not require the economy to do anything that is qualitatively different from the way it previously operated because the difference is merely of a quantitative nature consisting in “small variations at the margins” (Schumpeter, 1911/2007:81). This type of change resembles adding a constant to all the variables in an equation. Although this value affects the outcome, it does not fundamentally alter the relationship among the variables. A second type of change is that which results from extra-economic factors. If this was the only type of change possible, then the economy would simply be passively reacting to outside influences. And if this were the case, there would be no economic development in Schumpeter’s sense of the term (i.e., changes in the economy resulting from economic forces).

Static economics also assumes that economic conditions tend to move toward equilibrium, a state where conditions are in balance with one another. For example, if the market leads to a situation where the supply of, and the demand for, a product are in perfect proportion to one another, then this system is in a state of equilibrium assuming that no outside forces are disturbing it (R. Allen, 1991a:77). More generally, this can be thought of as the tendency of the economic system to “stabilize itself” and relationships between its variables (i.e., supply, demand, and price) (Swedberg, 1991b:28).

The model of static economics that Schumpeter addressed does not simply look at how the market for certain goods comes to be in a balanced state, what is known as “partial equilibrium,” but also how the entire economic system can come to be stabilized in this manner, that is, a state of “general equilibrium.” That such a state is possible is based on the assumption that specific economic quantities are part of an overall system where the value of any one quantity is related to all others. The implication of this assumption is that economic quantities are in “a state of mutual dependence [so] that a change in one of them, leads to a change in all of them” (Schumpeter, cited in Swedberg, 1991b:28). For example, if the price of one commodity (e.g., oil) increases, others (e.g., gasoline, air fares) will as well, and this, in turn, can affect the decisions of various economic actors (e.g., consumers may drive or fly less in response to increased fuel costs or the price of airline tickets). If an economy achieves general equilibrium under static conditions, the result is a state of “static-equilibrium.” As will be seen, the idea of static-equilibrium, and the assumption that the economy is moving toward such a state, has played a very important role in the history of economic thought. Schumpeter, however, believed there were other, more powerful, forces operating that either prevented the economy from remaining in this state for long or prevented it from achieving it in the first place.

The view that the economy tended to move toward a general state of static-equilibrium is largely the result of another feature of static analysis: the assumption that the market operates on the basis of “perfect competition” without any barriers to prevent businesses from producing any goods or services they wish. This idea implies, first, that there are no advantages that favor one firm over another. Second, it assumes that goods and services are produced in a more or less uniform manner by a number of different producers. Third, businesses can easily and freely move from producing one good or service to another if this is seen as being more profitable. Such a state is generally seen as being good for the consumer because it prevents any one firm
from keeping prices artificially high as would be the case if it had a monopoly on a particular product.

Schumpeter thought that this thinking on perfect competition was all wrong and that a different, and much more imperfect, form of competition was what mattered in economic development. To show the limitations of perfect competition and the static-equilibrium model more generally, Schumpeter created an ideal type of an economy operating under the conditions of this model. He referred to this as the “stationary” or “circular flow of economic life.”

A stationary economy has a number of distinguishing features, especially that no economic development would take place in it. That is, it offers no means by which economic factors can introduce new and different elements into the economy. As a result, it is forced to assume that economic variables (e.g., the supply and demand for labor, goods, raw materials, etc.) are more or less stable over time. Also, since this economy would be in a state of general equilibrium, or would quickly move there if any outside influence disturbed it, Schumpeter argued that all economic variables would necessarily be in balance. This means that production and consumption would be so balanced that, over time, the same types of goods, and in the same quantities, would be produced and consumed by the same people in a regular and repeating pattern. The result of this would be self-repeating loops of economic activity that Schumpeter (1911/2007:150) referred to as the circular, or stationary, flow. Under these conditions, competition would reduce the price of all goods and services to the value of their costs. That is, because businesses cannot offer anything new and/or different, and because perfect competition assumes that any business can easily and effectively provide any specific good or service offered in the economy, the only way that businesses can compete is on the basis of price, in particular by underselling their competition. But since no business is exempt from this situation because of perfect competition, any business that enjoys large, or even any, profits, would eventually be undersold by another business. This process of underselling will continue to chip away at profit margins until there is nothing from which to cut both for specific goods and for the economy as a whole. Once this point has been reached, “production must flow on endlessly profitless” (Schumpeter, 1911/2007:31). This does not mean that people would not make money and not have their needs met, or that enterprises would go bankrupt, but it does mean that what is often considered the central feature of capitalism—profit and the profit motive—would vanish under these conditions.

In fact, the implication of this is that profit, far from being the heart of normal capitalist operations, is actually something that occurs only under anomalous conditions. As Randall Collins (1992:174) put it, Schumpeter’s theory shows “that the general equilibrium model of neoclassical theory has room in it neither for change nor for profit; these come exogenously in the form of disturbances or for arbitrarily given resources.” This is because “the pure working of the market … implies that the unimpeded flow of capital and labor to the areas of greatest return should quickly equalize everyone’s returns. In the pure market, no one can make a profit, since competition will drive everything down to its cost” (174). That the economy working “in its most perfect condition should operate without profit” is both a paradox of static theory and a position that the theory cannot overcome (Schumpeter 1911/2007:31).

Although the preceding description may seem like an unrealistic picture of how the economy actually
operates, the image of a static economy moving in a circular manner does, in fact, stand at the heart of much classical economic thinking (R. Allen, 1991b:213) and even some more contemporary work in the field (Lazonick, 1994:249). Schumpeter (1908) took this type of economics so seriously that his first book was devoted largely to an analysis of it. In it, he showed the importance of static economics to the study of such issues as price formation, exchange, savings, and the process of distribution (Swedberg, 1991b:28). On a more general level, Schumpeter (2003:66) thought that this type of analysis was an important first step in the study of economics because it allowed the discipline to develop as a science of the economy.

However much static analysis can reveal, and however important it was to the development of economics as a science, Schumpeter was also quick to point out that there is much that this perspective does not, and indeed cannot, address. Its most important limitation is that it cannot deal with how the economy develops and changes over time. Schumpeter (2003:66) thought that a static analysis was like “a frame for a picture” where “the picture itself still has to be painted.” Moreover, because of its assumptions and its views of the world, this was a picture that static analysis simply could not paint. Even if it could, it would be like taking a snapshot of a motion picture: although certainly some, perhaps important, information would be captured in this image, much more would necessarily be missed. (Schumpeter [1954/1994:964] argued that in all fields of study, static analyses are developed prior to dynamic analyses because they are simpler to work out and their propositions are easier to prove. Talcott Parsons [see Chapter 17] had a similar view.) As a result, in his first book, Schumpeter called for the development of a new, and very different, form of economics that would try to capture all the movement found in capitalist economies. However, it was not until his second book that he began painting the picture that static economics could not.
Toward a More Dynamic Theory of the Economy

What are the economic factors within capitalism that cause it to change and thereby serve as an engine of economic development? Schumpeter traced capitalism’s dynamism to entrepreneurs (as agents) and their creative economic actions. He saw entrepreneurs as “the Carusos of big business” (McCraw, 2007:72). In particular, entrepreneurs are responsible for the development of what Schumpeter called “new combinations,” or the combining of existing resources, materials, and/or means of production in novel ways. In Schumpeter’s (1911/2007:31) words, “to produce other things, or the same things by a different method, means to combine these materials and forces differently.” However, later in his career Schumpeter (1939:59) offered a much broader definition of new combinations as simply any instance of “doing things differently” in the realm of economic life.

In either case, an example can be seen in Henry Ford’s combining of the assembly-line production method he saw at slaughterhouses with the production of automobiles. For Schumpeter, new combinations like these are produced by entrepreneurs (like Ford) with vision, insight, and desire. In fact, Schumpeter (1911/2007:74) defined entrepreneurs as those who create new combinations: “The carrying out of new combinations we call ‘enterprise’; the individuals whose function it is to carry them out we call ‘entrepreneurs.’” (It should be noted that entrepreneurs are not necessarily inventors, and vice versa. Although it is true that both entrepreneurs and inventors are innovative, it is entrepreneurs who introduce inventors’ innovations and creations into the economic system, thereby allowing for economic development. Any invention, no matter how novel and important, if not introduced into the economy by an entrepreneur, cannot be the basis for economic development. Similarly, an entrepreneur may not invent anything at all but simply combine existing elements in an economically novel manner.)

Thus, economic development is ultimately the result of economic agents seeking to do things differently in the economy. Where does this vision come from? Schumpeter’s initial answer, which is sometimes referred to as Mark I, attributed this to three psychological traits of entrepreneurs: “the dream and the will to found a private kingdom”; “the will to conquer”; and “the joy of creating, of getting things done, or simply of exercising one’s energy or ingenuity” (Schumpeter, 1911/2007:93). These were very heroic conceptions of entrepreneurs. Schumpeter (1951/1989:65) believed that their creative ability had less to do with intellect than it did with will. In other words, entrepreneurship is primarily a question of leadership as entrepreneurs carry through on their bold new visions in the face of the majority who are content to leave things as they are. However, this ability is not widely distributed in the population so that “the carrying out of new combinations is a special function, and the privilege of a type of people who are much less numerous than all those who have the ‘objective’ possibility of doing it” (Schumpeter, 1911/2007:81). In short, entrepreneurs “are a special type,” few in number despite being responsible for most economic development (81).

Creative actions lead to the introduction of qualitatively new and different elements into the economy so that the change inherent in capitalism is not continuous or linear, but rather discontinuous and non-linear. This means that, as a result of such change, things become somehow different in economic life; there are new products, new production techniques, new systems of distribution, and the like, which simply cannot be
reduced to what came before (e.g., the iPod cannot be reduced to the Walkman, and automation cannot be reduced to the assembly line). These changes also have a disequilibrating effect so that although market forces may act to stabilize economic relations, once a change has been introduced, no general or permanent state of equilibrium can ever be maintained since changes of this type are continually occurring.

This is similar to a rock thrown into a still pond. The rock initially creates waves, but they dissipate over time and the pond becomes still again. Schumpeter’s point is that even though this dissipation occurs for any single new combination introduced into the economy, entrepreneurs are continually throwing new rocks into the pool agitating economic relations with their creations so that the economy is never in a state of rest.

Profit is a particularly important result of the creative actions of entrepreneurs. For example, if a company discovers a new source of raw material that it uses in its product that is dramatically cheaper than the materials it currently uses, and if the company employs this new raw material, a dramatic cost savings will result that can be translated into higher profits for the company. Thus, according to Schumpeter, new combinations are the mechanism by which profit is generated in capitalism. But it is also the case that once the success of these new combinations is recognized by others, they will also use them (e.g., integrate the new raw material), thereby creating competition in this area. The result of this is that over time, and without the addition of other new combinations, newly generated profits will vanish. Profit is therefore ephemeral for Schumpeter (1911/2007:153–154), something that “slips from the entrepreneur’s grasp as soon as the entrepreneurial function is performed.” But it is also something that is inexorably intertwined with economic development: quite simply, “without development there is no profit, without profit no development” (154).

We can now see that what is normally considered economic success—profit—is the product of the creative actions of entrepreneurs and the introduction of qualitatively new elements into the economy. These also lead to capitalism’s dynamism and are the foundation of the ability of the economy to develop from within. There is, however, a flipside to this process. Although Schumpeter did not pay as much attention to it as he did to the introduction of the new, it is nevertheless of central importance to his theory. That is, although new elements are continually being introduced into the economy, it is also the case that old elements are being eliminated from it as a result of these innovations. As Schumpeter (1911/2007:67) put it, in a competitive economy the introduction of new elements “mean[s] the competitive elimination of the old”; the competition created by doing things differently in economic life can lead to the elimination of that which already exists.

Whereas it is true that throughout his career Schumpeter placed more “emphasis on the creative rather than destructive aspects of the process of economic evolution” (Andersen, 2004:1), he did give at least some attention to the role destruction plays in this process. In particular, Schumpeter (1942/1976:85) noted that destruction is important because of the motivating role it plays in capitalism. The mere possibility of elimination or destruction by the creations of others presents “an ever-present threat” to existing businesses. The result of this threat is that it “disciplines before it attacks. The businessman [sic] feels himself to be in a competitive situation even if he is alone in his field or … any effective competition between him and any other firms in the same or a neighboring field” (Schumpeter, 1942/1976:85). Schumpeter’s point is that the threat of destruction by the innovations of others motivates existing entrepreneurs to not rest on their laurels but
instead to innovate as a means of staving off actual, or possible, competition from the creations of others. If businesses do not do this, they could see their enterprise, or even entire industry, rendered obsolete by the innovative efforts of others. This ever-present threat of destruction was also the reason that Schumpeter, unlike others, did not fear monopolies. If they were to become stagnant in their operations, monopolies, too, could easily be eliminated by the creations of a new, more innovative firm.

While the threat of destruction is ever-present for businesses, in reality Schumpeter thought that major waves of creation, innovation, and, ultimately, destruction tended to occur in clusters with one innovation sparking the development of a number of others. Although creative destruction can happen at any time, it tends to occur in cycles or waves centered on a key innovation (e.g., the computer, the Internet, or, earlier, the railroad).
Schumpeter’s Sociology

As we saw, in many of his works Schumpeter attempted to develop a strictly economic theory of economic activity, but it is also the case that at many other times in his career he branched out to address issues not purely economic in nature. In fact, for Schumpeter (1911/2007:3) there were no purely economic facts: “The social process is really one indivisible whole. Out of its great stream the classifying hand of the investigator artificially extracts economic facts…. A fact is never exclusively or purely economic; other—and often more important—aspects always exist.” As such, Schumpeter recognized that perspectives other than economics were needed for investigations into the operations of the social whole. This was particularly the case for sociology. As Schumpeter (1949:167) once put it,

There is nothing surprising in the habit of economists to invade the sociological field. A large part of their work—practically the whole of what they have to say on institutions and on the forces that shape economic behavior—inevitably overlaps the sociologist’s preserves. In consequence, a no-man’s land or everyman’s land has developed that might conveniently be called economic sociology.

Schumpeter even included economic sociology as one of the “fundamental fields” that comprises the field of economics.
The Automobile: Historical Contexts

The automobile has been a defining technology of the twentieth century. As Schumpeter and others (e.g., Chirot, 2011) have shown, the automobile was responsible for tremendous economic growth in early and mid-twentieth century America. Moreover, the design of North American cities has been influenced by the mobility and personal freedom enabled by cars. Highways and suburbs, and the long work-day commutes associated with each, are unthinkable without the car. Finally, with the invention of the internal combustion engine, the automobile supported the development of the petroleum industry. Of course, as critics at the beginning of the twenty-first century point out, the pollutants created by this industry now threaten the viability of the planetary ecosystem.

Steam-powered cars were invented as early as 1704, but the modern petro-powered (gasoline) car was made by Karl Benz in 1885 in Germany (Parissien, 2014). Most famously, American Henry Ford introduced the Model T in 1908. Compared to other cars of the time, the Model T was cheap. By 1912 it was selling for $575 (less than an average annual wage) and was therefore affordable to a wide range of Americans, including the people who worked in Ford’s factories (Parissien, 2014). In contrast to the previous cars that were made and bought by hobbyists and speed racers, Ford’s cars were “designed for everyday wear and tear” (Parissien, 2014:14). They were “never a sporting car” and were meant to “connect the farmer and his family easily with the nearby town — and the doctor, and the family church” (14). That is, Ford’s car, and many cars to follow, was a consumer object targeted to the masses and intended to support specific lifestyles. By 1921 the Model T dominated world markets, accounting for 60% of global car sales (Parissien, 2014).

Of course, the success of the Model T depended on the use of the assembly line production process used in Ford’s factory. Introduced in 1913–1914 the method both doubled production and cut the number of hours to make a car (Parissien, 2014). The process also turned workers into automatons, extensions of the machines used to assemble the cars:

The camaraderie and cross-departmental relationships that had flourished in traditional engineering firms had gone, to be replaced by a system of snoopers, or “spotters,” who ensured that the new shop-floor regulations were rigorously observed. Workers were not allowed to sit, smoke or talk on the job. (Some learned to move their lips, in what became known as the “Ford whisper,” while keeping their faces immobile—the freezing of their features being nicknamed locally “the Fordization of the face.”) (Parissien, 2014:18)

Given current concerns over the relationship between fossil fuel industries and global warming, it is interesting to note that, despite its wild success in the twentieth century, the gas-powered car was not guaranteed success at the beginning of the twentieth century. Steam-powered and electric/battery-powered cars had been invented and, at least at first, were viable alternatives. The electric car had proven to be the “most impressive horseless carriage during this period” breaking the mile-per-minute speed record in 1899 (Urry, 2013:41–42). As John Urry (2013) pointed out, even the Ford factory was producing battery-powered cars. Ultimately, the battery-powered car faced two challenges. First, the discovery of cheap American oil made the petro-powered internal combustion engine a more affordable option. Second, during World War I, electrical vehicles couldn’t be recharged on the battlefield (Urry, 2013:42). This left the gas-powered car as the more formidable alternative and secured its reputation as a trustworthy vehicle.

In general, what Schumpeter (1954/1994:21) meant by economic sociology is the study of how “not only actions and motives and propensities [of people] but also social institutions that are relevant to economic behavior such as government, property inheritance, contract, and so on” affect economic action. For example, the introduction of the institution of free contracts, or of government regulations, means that social facts have been introduced into the economic equation, and that a purely economic analysis cannot account for these factors. Although the contract is essential to the operation of the capitalist economy, economics can say nothing about how or why contracts became the central, socially sanctioned means for organizing economic relations. This is a more general way of saying that economic action is often embedded in social processes and that without an understanding of such processes, one’s picture of economics is necessarily limited.
Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy is Schumpeter’s best-known venture into the area of economic sociology. There, Schumpeter made the bold prediction that the capitalist system would come to an end and be replaced by a socialist order. This, however, would not be the result of purely economic factors (e.g., that the market can no longer grow and/or there are no longer any opportunities for economic investment), but rather because capitalism comes to undermine its own institutional foundations (Swedberg, 1991b:156). The general contours of this prediction regarding the fate of capitalism are the same as those of Marx, though the root cause is very different.

Schumpeter (1942/1976:167) defined socialism as “an institutional pattern in which the control over the means of production and over production itself is vested with a central authority.” This involves a situation where the private sphere of the economy belongs to, and is controlled by, the public sphere of the state. Capitalism and entrepreneurialism would vanish under socialism because all economic matters would be centrally planned and performed by the government.

Marx, Weber, and Rationalization

We can get a better sense of Schumpeter as a sociological theorist by looking at his work in the context of other theorists discussed in this book, especially Marx and Weber.

Schumpeter clearly read Marx’s work and was a sophisticated commentator on, and critic of, that work. As a theoretically oriented economist trained in Europe in the late nineteenth century, and one who came of intellectual age there in the early twentieth century, Schumpeter could have hardly escaped an engagement with Marx. However, Schumpeter did manage to avoid the pitfalls of becoming either a “true believer” in Marxian theory or one who dismissed the theory in its entirety, often without reading it seriously. Thus, Schumpeter, like Weber, developed his theoretical orientation in a dialogue with Marx’s ideas (Dahms, 2011). In Schumpeter’s case, that dialogue was quite direct and explicit, whereas in Weber’s case the dialogue was largely elliptical and implicit. In this sense, Schumpeter’s thinking on Marx’s theory is far superior to that of Weber.

As for Weber, Schumpeter knew him personally and made use of his idea of rationalization. Schumpeter’s (1911/2007:57) interest was largely restricted to the rationalization of capitalism, while Weber (1904–1905/1958; 1927/1981) was very much interested in that, but also in the rationalization of much else, including the economy in general, religion, political structures, and the city (Weber, 1921/1978). Further, Weber developed what has come to be seen as the most important general theory of rationalization (Kalberg, 1980; D. Levine, 1981a; Ritzer, 2015) and there is no question that Schumpeter’s thinking on the rationalization of capitalism would have benefited from greater exposure to Weber’s far broader theory of rationalization. Not only did Schumpeter stand to gain much from that theory, but also from Weber’s criticisms of the rationalization process, especially the “irrationality of rationality.” Schumpeter was not a dispassionate analyst of capitalism. Although he generally wrote approvingly about it, he was also a critic of the way in which it was growing increasingly rationalized.

Schumpeter, as we’ve seen, agreed with Marx about the ultimate destruction of capitalism. However, whereas
Marx welcomed that destruction because of his hatred of capitalism, Schumpeter (1942/1976:155) feared it because he was a great admirer of the capitalist system, at least in its pure form. Whereas Marx saw the source of this destruction as inherent in the structures of capitalism, Schumpeter saw those structures as, in the main, quite sound. To Schumpeter, capitalism was being destroyed both by internal processes unleashed by it (especially the rationalization of the capitalist system) and by external changes that were also being affected, in part, by rationalization and that were adversely affecting capitalism.

Schumpeter, like Weber, saw rationalization as an ever-expanding process. Also like Weber, Schumpeter worried about this trend and its negative effects. Weber’s concern was characteristically broad with a focus on the development of an iron cage of rationalization that would adversely affect the individual, especially the “charismatic” individual. More narrowly, Schumpeter was concerned with a future in which capitalism was increasingly rationalized leaving little room for the initiative and creativity of the entrepreneur. In this sense, Schumpeter’s theory can be seen as a more specific version of Weber’s larger theory of rationalization.

Schumpeter contended that rationalized business organizations operate against the “heroic” individuals, those who have the will to produce something new in the economic system, who are needed for innovation. Here is the way he expressed his critique of rationalized business organizations:

economic progress tends to become depersonalized and automatized. Bureau and committee work tends to replace individual action…. Rationalized and specialized office work will eventually blot out personality, the calculable result, the “vision.” The leading man no longer has the opportunity to fling himself into the fray. He is becoming just another office worker—and one who is not always difficult to replace.

(Schumpeter, 1942/1976:133)

In this context Schumpeter was discussing, implicitly, the death of the entrepreneur in big business.

Schumpeter’s argument here is very close to Weber’s more general argument about charisma and its loss as a result of the routinization of charisma. In the early history of capitalism, in Schumpeter’s (1939) view, charismatic inventors, innovators, entrepreneurs played a much more important role. However, as capitalism came to be dominated by highly rationalized big businesses, there was less and less of a role for such charismatic figures. Specialists within those firms produced new ideas and one gets the sense that Schumpeter had almost as little regard for such specialists as did Weber (1904–1905/1958:182).

In spite of his regret for the demise of the “heroic” entrepreneur, there was a tendency for Schumpeter, especially in his later work such as Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, to reify his thinking about capitalism in the sense that he saw economic action being propelled less by individual actors and more by institutional processes, especially what he called the “capitalist engine.” Such an engine can be seen as a reified phenomenon because once it is turned “on,” it runs without human intervention. We have encountered the concept of reification previously, in Chapter 5 on Marx and Chapter 9 on Simmel. It is an idea associated
mainly with Marx (“fetishism of commodities”) and neo-Marxists (especially Georg Lukács). It involves “thingification”; the fact that when people treat various phenomena as things, they are likely to become things that are not only beyond people’s control, but control people.

What does the capitalist engine “do” when it is “on,” when it is continually “moving forward”? When it is on, the capitalist engine is producing and when it is moving forward, it is producing what is essential to Schumpeter’s view of capitalism—that which is “new.” Thus, of great importance to capitalism, in Schumpeter’s view, is innovation because that is the process that yields that which is new: “The fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the new consumer goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates” (Schumpeter, 1942/1976:83; italics added).

Such a reified perspective tends to leave little or no place for a heroic, charismatic figure like an entrepreneur. The “capitalist engine” is a reified entity, and it is animated by an equally reified impulse to move forward. To put this another way, it is the capitalist engine, animated by this impulse, that “acts” by creating that which is new. In his later (Mark II) work, Schumpeter appears to endow capitalism, especially the capitalist engine, with a life of its own apart from the actors who are involved in, or even lead, it. Thus, the emphasis is on capitalism and not on the capitalist. Schumpeter argued that the innovative role of entrepreneurs has been, and will, as a result of a widespread process of social rationalization, continue to be displaced by a more standardized and bureaucratic form of innovation (Dahms, 1995). This is another way of saying that Schumpeter thought that innovation was increasingly being routinized as the entrepreneurial function was taken over by large-scale enterprises (such as big business) with their research and development divisions.

This reified conceptualization contradicts Schumpeter’s previously discussed thinking on the entrepreneur. In his early work, the entrepreneur is a human actor and, in fact, he mentions people like Richard Arkwright, Josiah Wedgewood, and James Watt as specific examples of the entrepreneur. However, what makes them entrepreneurs is not their role in invention, innovation, or in creating anything new. As Schumpeter (1942/1976:132; italics added) put it, “the function of entrepreneurs is to reform or revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting an invention, or more generally, an untried technological possibility for producing a new commodity or producing an old one in a new way, by opening up a new supply of materials or a new outlet for products, by reorganizing an industry and so on.” Thus, the entrepreneurial function does not consist in creation and/or invention; rather, it is to take what has been created and invented and do something with them in the realm of the economy (e.g., create a new market for an invention, use an invention to produce goods in a new manner, etc.). Schumpeter (1942/1976:132; italics added) was more explicit slightly later: “This [entrepreneurial] function does not essentially consist in either inventing anything or otherwise creating the conditions which the enterprise exploits. It consists in getting things done.” (Getting things done undoubtedly involves creating the “new combinations” discussed earlier.) But because he gets things done, the entrepreneur is, in Schumpeter’s view, more important to the capitalist system than inventors, innovators, and even the capitalists (and their economic capital). Without them these innovations would remain outside of the economic system and therefore would have no impact on it.
Even if we accord importance to the individual (the inventor, but especially the entrepreneur), such an actor played a more creative role in the early history of capitalism. Schumpeter saw this role declining, especially in large corporations, as capitalism moved forward. Thus, there are two Schumpeters: “Schumpeter I strongly endorses entrepreneurs. Schumpeter II saw their downfall with the rise of a new type of constantly innovative corporate organization” (Carayannis, Ziemnowicz, and Spillan, 2007:24). In the latter Schumpeter it is the reified (and rationalized) organization, not the individual, that creates. The innovative entrepreneur remains important in Schumpeter’s later work in small start-up businesses. However, the “giant firm,” itself an important innovation from Schumpeter’s perspective (and a product of the creative destruction of the small firm), operates against creativity on the part of the entrepreneur, and puts it in the hands of the organization as a whole. Large firms become key components of the capitalist engine in advanced capitalism.

It is interesting to note that what Schumpeter actually feared about the future of capitalism was that it would become even more (too) reified, further reducing the crucial role played by the entrepreneur (and perhaps the inventor). This is because Schumpeter believed that as capitalism developed, it spawned bigger and bigger businesses that both centralized and rationalized their operations to an increasing degree. This process of rationalization is particularly important for Schumpeter because of the way it operates against the entrepreneur by making what were once “heroic” acts of economic creation (e.g., the introduction of a new product into the market by the will of an individual entrepreneur) something seemingly almost automatic. The “social function” of the entrepreneur is “losing importance and is bound to lose it at an accelerating rate in the future even if the economic process itself of which entrepreneurship was the prime mover went on unabated” because resistance to change is diminishing as people become accustomed to it (Schumpeter, 1942/1976:132). Innovation “is being reduced to routine. Technological progress is increasingly becoming the business of teams of trained specialists who turn out what is required and make it work in predictable ways. The romance of earlier commercial adventure is rapidly wearing away, because so many more things can be strictly calculated that had of old to be visualized in a flash of genius” (132). When this happens, the nature of economic development changes: instead of the explosive periods of growth brought about by the innovations of individual entrepreneurs, there will be the slow and steady “development” of specialized economic planners who will “routinely produce growth, but not real change” (R. Allen, 1991b:124). In other words, the economic development of the entrepreneur will be displaced by the economic management of the planned economy where innovation and development happen in a routine, rationalized, and seemingly reified manner.

Like Weber, Schumpeter thought that capitalism and the spread of rationality were processes that went hand in hand. However, Schumpeter (1942/1976:122) noted that “the rational attitude presumably forced itself on the human mind primarily from economic necessity; it is the everyday economic task to which we as a race owe our elementary training in rational thought and behavior.” Nevertheless, for Schumpeter (124), “capitalism … has after all been the propelling force of the rationalization of human behavior.” However, the process of social rationalization is not limited to the economy and one area of sociological concern where Schumpeter saw rationalization proceeding quite rapidly was in the family. For example, Schumpeter (157) thought that the “disintegration of the bourgeois family” is “wholly attributable to the rationalization of everything in life, which we have seen is one of the effects of capitalist evolution. In fact, it is but one of the results of the spread of that rationalization to the sphere of private life.” Schumpeter (157) thought that the
rationalization of family life entails the incorporation of “a sort of inarticulate system of cost accounting” into private life which allows one “to become aware of the heavy personal sacrifices that family ties and especially parenthood entail under modern conditions.” He argued that this fosters an attitude that focuses their attention “on ascertainable details of immediate utilitarian relevance” as opposed to the less tangible benefits of family life which “almost invariably [escape] the rational searchlight of modern individuals” (Schumpeter 1942/1976:158). So while capitalism was the initial impetus for rationalization by helping in both its development and spread, Schumpeter believed that over time rationalization begins to undermine this economic system by destroying the institutional framework within which capitalism operates. One example of this for Schumpeter was just seen in the discussion of how rationalization is leading to the disintegration of the traditional bourgeois family. A similar example within capitalism is the way it comes to undermine increasingly the standing of lower-level capitalists, as small producers and traders face competition from big businesses that will, over time, force them out of business. Thus, Schumpeter agreed with Marx that the future of industry will be dominated by a small number of very large firms that have driven out their smaller competitors.
The Future

Schumpeter believed that rationalization is the ultimate gravedigger of capitalism. However, as rationalization undermines the institutional foundations of capitalism, it also lays the foundations for socialism, or the centralized planning and operation of the economy. This is because, far from entailing the demise of rationalization, “the socialist blueprint is [actually] drawn at a higher level of rationality” (Schumpeter 1942/1976:196). In other words, Schumpeter thought that socialism would continue, although at a higher degree, the process of “social rationalization” that capitalism had helped to nourish and support (Dahms, 1995). In fact, Schumpeter (1942/1976:188) believed it could very well be that a socialist economy is more economically efficient than its capitalist counterpart. Thus, in summarizing his argument, Schumpeter noted that

the whole of our argument might be put in a nutshell by saying that socialization means a stride beyond big business on the way that has been chalked out by it or, what amounts to the same thing, that socialist management may conceivably prove as superior to big-business capitalism as big-business capitalism has proved to be to the kind of competitive capitalism of which the English industry of a hundred years ago was the prototype.

(Schumpeter, 1942/1976:195–196)

Of course, this prediction has not come to pass—capitalism has not transitioned into socialism—and Schumpeter’s venture into prophecy, much like Marx’s, was not a success. In many ways this is because Schumpeter overestimated the effects of rationalization on social life as a whole, including economic matters, as well as underestimating the ability of capitalism to creatively destroy the developments on which he based his predictions (such as many big businesses). In fact, Schumpeter’s prediction regarding the transformation of capitalism to socialism is based, somewhat ironically, on a static conception of rationality. That is, Schumpeter thought that economic rationality would only manifest itself in the rise of big business and that these businesses, because of their size and their superior rationalization, would come to dominate the economy. Rationality, however, is not static; instead, it is a very dynamic phenomenon that is transformed over time and in different contexts. For example, whereas Weber focused on the disenchancing nature of rationalization, both Colin Campbell (2005) and George Ritzer (2010) have shown how rationality can also be used as a means of enchantment, especially in consumer settings. Even Weber (1904–1905/1958:78), who thought that life as a whole was increasingly being rationalized, cautioned that “rationalism is an historical concept which covers a whole world of different things” and that every study of rationalism should begin with the proposition that “one may … rationalize life from fundamentally different basic points of view and in very different directions.” Thus, what is rational in one place and one point in time may not be rational in another, so that even if capitalist organizations are becoming increasingly rationalized, how this manifests itself will change over time (in much the same way that although capitalist firms might always be guided by the profit motive, how they go about trying to obtain this will, because of creative destruction, changes over the course of time).
For example, it might have been rational for businesses to increase their size and scope (i.e., to develop into big businesses) under conditions of Fordism (Harvey, 1990). However, beginning in the early 1970s Fordism began to face a number of crises (Glyn, 2006) that challenged its entire operational base, many of which centered around a trait that was both the key to Fordism’s success and ultimately to its demise: rigidity (Harvey, 1990:142). As a result, we have seen the near-demise of the ultimate big businesses—the Big Three of the American automobile industry—GM, Ford, and Chrysler. That Schumpeter did not recognize that capitalism could develop in a manner other than through the rise of big businesses highlights that he, the thinker who most stressed the dynamic nature of capitalism, held a very static of idea of what rationalism was and how it would affect economic development.

As can be seen, Schumpeter was not good at forecasting the future of capitalism, and there is a certain irony to the fact that Schumpeter's work is today experiencing a revival even though current circumstances look nothing like Schumpeter's predictions. It should be pointed out, however, that Schumpeter also thought that Marx got a great deal wrong in his prophecy in particular, and in his theory more generally, but he and his followers were nevertheless able to develop many important ideas and to build upon them. The same can be done with many of Schumpeter’s ideas, especially creative destruction.
Contemporary Applications

In spite of some poor forecasts, Schumpeter's thinking remains highly relevant today in a variety of ways and at various levels. For example, in terms of contemporary theory, he offers a kind of agency-structure theory dealing with the relationship between the entrepreneur and the capitalist engine. In addition, in recent years sociologists have engaged with Schumpeter's ideas to help think through the causes and consequences of the 2008 economic crisis. For example, both William Sewell (2012) and Daniel Chirot (2011) emphasize the importance of Schumpeter's long-term analysis of economic cycles. Most contemporary theories focus on short-term, rational, psychological explanations of economic phenomena (Chirot, 2011). Schumpeter is one of a group of economic theorists, such as Nikolai Kondratieff (1925) and world systems theorists (Wallerstein, 1989), who challenge this approach and draw our attention to long-term cycles of economic change.

Capitalist economies have a cyclical rhythm to them. The Depression of the 1930s, the economic crisis of the 1970s, and the recession of 2008 reflect larger historical patterns of economic expansion and contraction. As we have explained earlier in the chapter, Schumpeter tied these cycles to the creative destruction driven by the introduction of new technologies. The invention of the automobile not only led to the development of an automobile industry but also spawned developments associated with the automobile: the petroleum industry and roadway technologies, to name a few. As Chirot (2011:125) has pointed out, patterns of economic growth and stagnation are “caused by the arrival of new technologies in ‘swarms.’” On the one hand, this swarm of technologies leads to the expansion of the economy. On the other hand, once these technologies saturate the market, they lead to economic slowdown and stagnation. Consumer interest dries up and uncompetitive firms die off. A new phase of growth awaits the development of a new technology.

Sewell (2012:312) wrote that the success of these new technologies depends on “entrepreneurial financing … that is speculative in character.” In other words, the constant renewal of capitalism requires not merely the development of new technologies, but also the activity of financial speculators who are willing to take risks on innovations that are not yet proven. Sewell’s point is that the complexity of speculative financial investment instruments (also a technological innovation) has grown significantly since the 1980s. This complexity, and the risk associated with it, “has an inherent tendency to magnify the ups and down of the business cycle, thereby risking creative destruction that may be more destructive than creative” (313). According to both Sewell and Chirot, then, while the basic pattern described by Schumpeter remains consistent, the volatility of the current moment makes the future uncertain.

Since the 1970s, states have attempted to intervene in these increasingly volatile cycles through investment during economic downturns. In this respect, fiscal policy (i.e. taxation), something Schumpeter also wrote about, impacts the rhythms of capitalism (Smart, 2012). Here too, Schumpeter had something to add. His view is that the government should not bail out the companies mired in old methods of operation as these interfere with the large-scale logic of creative destruction. For example, he would be critical of the efforts of the American government to bail out the automobile industry and its increasingly obsolete automobiles and the technology used to produce them. Whether we agree or disagree with Schumpeter’s recommendations, in the end he teaches us to appreciate “the tremendous power of economic forces in our contemporary lives”
(Sewell, 2012:302).
Summary

Joseph Schumpeter is usually thought of as an economic theorist, but there is clearly a strong sociological theory embedded in his economic theory. He offered a dynamic model of the economy that contrasts with the static models that tended to dominate economic thinking. Of particular interest to sociology is his dynamic model of capitalism and the key role accorded to innovation in a capitalistic economy. In his early work, he saw the entrepreneur as the agent most responsible for innovation in capitalism. In his later work, his focus shifted dramatically to the structures of capitalism where he saw the “capitalist engine,” rather than the entrepreneur as agent, as the key force in innovation in particular and in the dynamism of capitalism more generally.

Schumpeter is best known today for his ideas on creative destruction. Although he had relatively little to say about this concept, it has proven highly attractive to many academicians (including sociologists) and businesspeople. In many ways it is the most essential process within capitalism and, in its extreme, may be seen as synonymous with capitalism. That is, a capitalist system is defined by the creation of the new, which is often associated with, if not leading to, the destruction of the old, especially that which stands in the way of the new.

Schumpeter’s thinking has much in common with the work of classical sociological theorists, especially Marx and Weber. Like Marx, Schumpeter presented a dynamic theory of capitalism and believed that there was ongoing movement in the direction of socialism. In Schumpeter’s view, this movement was associated with the development of large-scale, highly rational organizations that were supplanting the entrepreneur. Such organizations, with their centralized structures and planning, have much in common with socialized organizations and represent movement in the direction of socialism. This also serves to indicate Schumpeter’s interest in rationality and the process of rationalization. He shared such an interest with Weber, and both worried about the threats posed by rationalization. Schumpeter’s concerns about the fate of the entrepreneur parallel Weber’s worry over the fate of charisma in a rationalized world.
14 Karl Mannheim
In some ways, Karl Mannheim is an unusual figure to deal with in a book on classical sociological theory. For example, unlike many others, Mannheim is not viewed by most observers as having created a “grand theory” that has stood the test of time. As Brian Longhurst put it, “Mannheim did not attempt to produce a completely closed and unified theory or system” (1988:24). Furthermore, whereas all the other classical theorists discussed in this book have created many memorable theoretical ideas, it is hard to associate more than a few such ideas with Mannheim. Mannheim was an essayist who wrote no great tomes like Karl Marx’s *Capital* or Max Weber’s *Economy and Society*. Finally, unlike the other classic theorists discussed here, Mannheim’s critics have far outnumbered his adherents. Even Robert Merton, an early and sympathetic analyst of Mannheim’s work, ends his famous essay on that work on a highly critical note: It “is by no means definitive—a term which strikes a harsh discord when applied to any work of science” (1941/1957:508).

Because, in part, his work is spread across many essays written over several decades, it tends to be repetitious and disjointed. Many ideas are raised but never completely and fully developed. At innumerable points in Mannheim’s work, one encounters phrases such as, “but I do not have time to deal with this issue now.” There are also many inconsistencies in the body of Mannheim’s work, and although he was well aware of them, he never undertook a comprehensive and systematic effort to reconcile them.

I use this method [essays] because I think that in a marginal field of human knowledge we should not conceal inconsistencies, so to speak covering up our wounds, but our duty is to show the sore spots in human thinking at its present stage…. These inconsistencies are the thorn in the flesh from which we have to start.

(Cited in Kettler, Meja, and Stehr, 1982:26–27)

Further complicating matters is the fact that in 1933, Mannheim was forced to move from Germany to England as a result of the Nazis’ ascent to power. His work in Germany (and prior to that in Hungary) was very different from the essays he wrote in England, and this difference contributed to the impression that his work is disjointed.

Given all this, the obvious question is: Why bother writing (to say nothing of reading) a chapter devoted to the work of Karl Mannheim? The answer is that Mannheim was the major figure in the invention of a field, the sociology of knowledge (Wissenssoziologie), that has been, and is, of great interest to sociologists in general and sociological theorists in particular (McCarthy, 1996, 2007; Pels, 1996). Furthermore, it was Mannheim’s intellectual efforts over a period of many years that played the key role in institutionalizing the field. Few
individual thinkers can be credited with the central role in the “invention” of a field, as well as with successfully nurturing it into becoming an established subfield within sociology. Today the sociology of knowledge is such a field, and those who work within it owe a great debt to the ideas of Karl Mannheim. In spite of his critical orientation toward Mannheim’s work, Merton makes this clear:

Mannheim has sketched the broad contours of the sociology of knowledge with remarkable skill and insight…. Mannheim’s procedures and substantive findings clarify relations between knowledge and social structure which have hitherto remained obscure…. We may await considerable enlightenment from further explorations of the territory in which he pioneered.

(Merton, 1941/1957:508)

Given this introduction, we turn immediately to the heart of Mannheim’s legacy to sociological theory (and sociology more generally)—the sociology of knowledge.
The Sociology of Knowledge

Although there are many other forerunners, Mannheim makes it quite explicit that “the sociology of knowledge emerged from Marx” (1931/1936:309).

The Sociology of Knowledge and the Theory of Ideology

Mannheim argued that Marx created the prototype of the sociology of knowledge, the “theory of ideology.” As we saw in Chapter 6, Marx saw ideologies as distortions of reality that reflect the interests of the ruling class (the capitalists). Mannheim argued that such ideologies are seen by Marxists as “more or less conscious deceptions and disguises” (1931/1936:265). To the followers of Marx, the goal of the study of ideologies is to unmask these conscious distortions.

Although Mannheim acknowledged the importance of the theory of ideology as a starting point, he also believed that it has great limitations. For one thing, ideologies need not, in his view, involve the conscious intention to distort reality. Rather, distortions are more likely to occur simply because ideas emerge from specific sectors of the social world and are therefore inherently limited, one-sided, and distorted. Thus, whereas Marx used the term ideology in a negative sense, to Mannheim, ideology “has no moral or denunciatory intent” (Mannheim, 1931/1936:266). Ideologies are almost inevitable because ideas emerge from specific and circumscribed areas of the social world.

For another thing, ideologies are not, as the Marxists suggested, simply the product of social classes, especially the ruling class, but can emerge from any and all sectors of the social world, including “generations, status groups, sects, occupational groups, schools, etc.” (Mannheim, 1931/1936:276). In spite of these multiple sources, Mannheim concluded that “class stratification is the most significant, since in the final analysis all the other social groups arise from and are transformed as parts of the more basic conditions of production and domination” (276; italics added). Nonetheless, Mannheim defined the sociology of knowledge, far more broadly than would a Marxist, as the study of “the relationship between human thought and the conditions of existence in general” (277).

In differentiating between ideological and sociological analyses of knowledge, Mannheim distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives. If one peers out from within one’s own group, one tends to believe that it produces “ideas,” whereas all other groups produce “ideologies.” However, adopting the extrinsic perspective of the sociologist, one is able to see that all systems of ideas, including those emanating from one’s own group, are ideologies. “The sociological consideration of intellectual phenomena is a special class of extrinsic interpretation of ideas” (Mannheim, 1926/1971:119).

Generations

Mannheim’s (1928–1929/1952) discussion of the relationship between generations and knowledge illustrates well the difference between his orientation and that of Marx. The position of a person’s generation vis-à-vis other generations is clearly not economic in nature, but it nonetheless has a profound effect on the thinking of
those associated with it. The members of a generation are not a “concrete group” in the sense that they do not interact with one another in a patterned and repetitive manner. However, they can be considered as a kind of a group by virtue of the fact that they share a particular social location. A generation has this characteristic in common with a social class. However, the nature of their social locations is different. Social classes are defined by their location in the political-economic system, whereas generations “share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process” (Mannheim, 1928–1929/1952:290). (Another group of people that Mannheim [1932/1993] described as sharing a social location is women [Kettler and Meja, 1993].) The key to a generation is not the biological fact of the common year of birth, but the sociological implications of that biological fact (Pilcher, 1994). For example, what is crucial is the fact that the members of each generation share in a distinctive phase of the collective historical process. They experience a common set of events, a set that is different from that experienced by all generations that have come before or will come after (Cherrington, 1997). Particularly relevant to the contemporary moment, generations can be defined by the experience of a common historical trauma such as war, genocide, or colonization (Edmunds and Turner, 2005).

Although they occupy different locations, classes and generations “both endow the individuals sharing in them with a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limit them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action” (Mannheim, 1928–1929/1952:290).

Mannheim refined his notion of generation by arguing that a generation as actuality emerges when members of a generation begin to orient themselves to one another, both positively and negatively, on the basis of larger ideas and their interpretation of them. Then there are generation units, or members of a generation who share common ideas and develop a much more concrete bond with one another. Any generation may be made up of a number of different generation units.

Thus, Mannheim’s use of the concept of generations is useful in allowing us to begin to get a better sociological understanding of intra- and intergenerational differences in thought and action. That is, a given generation can be made up of a number of generation units that may differ, and even conflict, with one another. It is even more likely that different generations will have conflicting viewpoints.

Politics
Two major facts define a good portion of the life of Karl Mannheim: ill health and refugee status.

Mannheim was born in Budapest, Hungary, on March 27, 1893. A heart defect made him sickly from birth; he had a slight heart attack when he was only twenty and he died from a heart attack on January 9, 1947, at the age of 53 (Woldring, 1986). Although he accomplished much during his life, one wonders what he might have accomplished had he been blessed with better health and a longer life.

Mannheim was born into a middle-class Jewish family. He attended the University of Budapest (as well as the University of Berlin, where he frequented lectures by Georg Simmel), from which he received a doctorate in philosophy in 1918. He encountered the leading Hungarian scholar of the time, Georg Lukács, and participated in the circle that surrounded him. In fact, Lukács became his early mentor, and Mannheim declared himself a "respectful follower" of Lukács (Loader, 1985:13).

In 1918, Hungary experienced a revolution in which a bourgeois-socialist regime under Mihály Károlyi came to power. However, it was short-lived and was replaced in early 1919 by Bela Kun’s communist regime. Lukács had become a communist in late 1918 and became a government official under Kun. Although Mannheim had remained largely apolitical, Lukács appointed him lecturer in philosophy in the College of Education at the University of Budapest. By mid-1919, however, Kun had been replaced by a counterrevolutionary, fascist, anti-Semitic regime headed by Admiral Miklós Horthy. (Interestingly, much of Mannheim’s later thinking was to be affected by the relationship among the three ideologies—bourgeois, communist, fascist—he encountered in his intellectually formative years in Hungary.) Given his linkages to Lukács, and thereby indirectly to communism, and the fact that he was Jewish, Mannheim was forced to flee Hungary by the end of 1919 and became a refugee for the first time (Karácsony, 2008).

After several intermediate stops, Mannheim ended up in Heidelberg, Germany, in March 1921. In that same month, he married...
Juliska Lang, the daughter of a prosperous Budapest family. The latter disapproved of their daughter's marriage to a relatively impoverished academic. Juliska Lang was an intellectual herself, with a Ph.D. in psychology, and she later held a professorship at the University of Amsterdam. The marriage was childless. Juliska was to play a key role in Mannheim's work, especially in the posthumous publication of many of his essays.

In Heidelberg, Mannheim became a member of the “Weber group.” Although Max Weber had died the preceding year, the group continued on, headed by his wife, Marianne, and his brother, Alfred, a noted scholar. It was Alfred Weber who succeeded Georg Lukács as Mannheim’s mentor.

Over the next several years, Mannheim lived as a private scholar in Heidelberg. Finally, in mid-1926 Mannheim became a privatdozent (the same marginal position occupied by Simmel for much of his academic life) at Heidelberg. After his appointment, Mannheim applied for German citizenship and was naturalized. It appeared as if his days as a refugee were over. In 1930 Mannheim stepped up to the position of professor and director of the College of Sociology at Goethe University in Frankfurt.

Mannheim now found himself deeply affected by two ideologies of which he disapproved—communism and Nazism. His disapproval of communism served to distance him from the famous Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt (the so-called Frankfurt school), even though the institute was housed in the same building as the sociology department (Pels, 1993). This school produced a number of famous sociologists (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and others) as well as a theoretical orientation, “critical theory,” that was to play an important role in the future of sociology. Although he was put off by its communist orientation, Mannheim did share with the Frankfurt school an opposition to Nazism. For their part, the critical theorists were angered by Mannheim's lack of interest in practical and political matters (Wiggershaus, 1994).

In January 1933, Adolph Hitler came to power, and as a Jew, Mannheim was almost immediately given a “leave of absence” from the university. Sensing imminent grave danger, Mannheim left Germany within a few months and eventually arrived in London in May 1933, as a result of an invitation from the London School of Economics. He was again a refugee, a position he was to occupy until 1940, when he became a naturalized British citizen.

For many years Mannheim held temporary lectureships in England, and it was not until 1945 that he was awarded a full-time professorship (in sociology and education) at the University of London. After the war, Mannheim was invited to return to the University of Budapest as a professor of sociology, but he refused.

Mannheim's work went through a variety of stages that reflected changes in his personal life and in the society and world in which he lived (Remmling, 1975). His earliest work, 1918 to 1924, was highly philosophical. In Germany between 1925 and 1932, his work became largely sociological, with his most notable, albeit controversial, contribution (Kettler and Meja, 1994, 1995; Shils, 1995) in this period being *Ideology and Utopia* (1929/1936). After 1933 and his move to England, Mannheim grew more interested in applying sociological ideas to a variety of issues, especially the planning of society. His most important book during this period was *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (1935/1940).

Mannheim lived much of his life as a refugee from Hungary, first in Germany and then in England. This marginality, and others (e.g., his position vis-à-vis Marxist revolutionaries), led him to become a member of what became a central idea in his work, the “socially unattached intelligentsia.” Living in a variety of social and cultural settings, the intelligentsia was in a unique position to have a diverse set of experiences. But Mannheim went beyond simply relishing this diversity; he used it to synthesize a variety of antithetical ideas and social forces (Kettler, Meja, and Stehr, 1984). It was Mannheim's unique, "unattached" position, as well as his desire to use that position to synthesize a wide variety of ideas, that helped to give his work its unique qualities.

In contrast to the Marxian perspective, the major goal of the sociology of knowledge to Mannheim is not the unmasking of distortions, but rather the careful study of the social sources of distorted thinking. Thus, whereas Marx's theory of ideology is primarily political in orientation, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is more academic and scientific in its approach. As A. P. Simonds put it, “Throughout his work, the sociology of knowledge is recommended not as a means for discrediting, undermining, or devaluing knowledge, but as a tool of understanding” (1978:30).

This is not to say, however, that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is apolitical. We will deal with the
political implications of Mannheim’s thinking toward the close of this chapter. Anticipating that discussion, Mannheim believed that the problems of his day, especially the rise of fascism, were a result of the fact that thought had grown out of control. The sociology of knowledge promised to regain control over knowledge by uncovering its unconscious motivations, presuppositions, and roots. After these were uncovered, they could be controlled. Conversely, they could not be controlled as long as we are unaware of them. Thus, in Mannheim’s view, the sociology of knowledge can lead to the “scientific guidance of political life” (1929/1936:5). In other words, it can help the political system prevent knowledge systems from spiraling out of control.

Thus, Mannheim wanted his approach to be both political and scientific. As a result, Pels wrote, there are “obvious tensions between involvement and detachment which seem to ravage Mannheim’s work from beginning to end” (1993:49).

A Sociological Approach

Although his work is divided on the issue of politics and science, there is no ambiguity over the fact that it is sociological in orientation. For example, Mannheim described the sociology of knowledge as “one of the youngest branches of sociology” (1931/1936:264). Mannheim took as his goal the institutionalization of the sociology of knowledge as a subfield within sociology: “The sociological analysis of thought, undertaken thus far only in a fragmentary and casual fashion, now becomes the object of a comprehensive scientific programme” (1925/1971:105).

Mannheim sometimes described the sociology of knowledge as a theory, and at other times as a method, but it is certainly empirical because it is oriented to the study, description, and (theoretical) analysis of the ways in which social relationships influence thought. One of the most common ways in which Mannheim described the sociology of knowledge is in terms of its concern with “existential determination of knowledge.” In other words, knowledge is determined by social existence (with the individual actor standing between, or mediating, the relationship between the social world and knowledge). However, even though he used the word determines, unlike some Marxists (but not Marx himself), Mannheim is not a determinist: “this does not mean to say that mind and thought are nothing but the expression and reflex of various ‘locations’ in the social fabric, and that there exist[s] … no potentiality or ‘freedom’ granted in mind” (Mannheim, 1952/1971a:260–261). He meant, rather, that there is always some sort of relationship between existence and knowledge, but the precise nature of that relationship varies and can be determined only by empirical study.

Although knowledge is amenable to a variety of types of empirical research, Mannheim was most interested in historical-sociological research tracing the forms taken by the relationship between knowledge and existence over time:

The most important task of the sociology of knowledge at present is to demonstrate its capacity in actual research in the historical-sociological realm. In this realm it must work out criteria for exactness for establishing empirical truths and for assuring their control. It must emerge from the stage where it engages in casual intuitions and gross generalizations.

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Mannheim’s interest in “exact” empirical research might lead one to believe that he was a positivist. Although Mannheim (1953/1971:195) clearly wanted the sociology of knowledge to be scientific (as opposed to philosophical), and more generally a “science of society,” he regarded positivism as a “deluded school” because it emphasizes only one type of empiricism (the collection of data in the manner that it is done in the natural sciences) and because it sees no role for philosophical and theoretical orientations. Thus, Mannheim (1953) criticized the American sociology of his day on these grounds by, for example, attacking its “exactitude complex” and its lack of concern for the great theoretical problems of the day. The natural science approach was not deemed useful for analyzing the most important factors in social life.

Mannheim, like Weber, saw many advantages in the human sciences over the positivistic natural sciences, especially their ability to “understand” and interpret the phenomena (knowledge, the human mind, and its products) they are studying. For example, Mannheim argued that “by the use of the technique of understanding, the functional interpenetration of psychic experiences and social situations … can … be much more intensively penetrated in their essential character than if coefficients of correlation were established between the various factors” (1929/1936:44–45). Furthermore, although Mannheim wanted the sociology of knowledge to be empirical, he also wanted it to involve the theoretical (even philosophical) interpretation of its results.

However, the greatest weakness of positivism in Mannheim’s view is its focus on reality that is experienced as real and material. As a result, “its methods are entirely inadequate especially in treating intellectual-spiritualistic reality” (Mannheim, 1925/1971:76). The natural science model is well suited to the study of material realities (Emile Durkheim’s material social facts), but not to immaterial realities such as ideas (Durkheim’s nonmaterial social facts) that are the concern of the sociology of knowledge. Similarly, positivism is inadequate from a phenomenological perspective (see Chapter 15, on Alfred Schutz) because it is “blind to the fact that perception and knowledge of meaningful objects as such involves interpretation and understanding” (76).

In spite of the fact that he was not a positivist and was highly critical of positivism, this viewpoint was important to Mannheim for three reasons. First, Mannheim (controversially) saw Marx as a positivist and it was Marx who, as we have seen, was considered by Mannheim to be the founder of the modern study of the sociology of knowledge. Second, positivism shifted the center of experience to the economic-social sphere, and it is in this existential realm that Mannheim embedded knowledge. Finally, positivism led to the granting of primacy to empirical reality and to empirical research. As such, it helped to end the predominance of pure speculation in the study of ideas. As a result, one could no longer merely philosophize and theorize about knowledge, but had to go out and collect empirical data on knowledge. Theory was possible, but only on the basis of empirical results. Mannheim did not want to do natural science, but he did want to do a kind of “science” that was suitable to the study of knowledge: “Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge represented an
attempt to do justice to the meaningful nature of social thought without thereby surrendering the aspiration to establish ‘objective’ (in the sense of intersubjectively communicable) knowledge about social phenomena” (Simonds, 1978:20).

**Phenomenology**

Another important input into Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge was phenomenology, especially the work of Max Scheler (Dürrschmidt, 2005). The phenomenologist points to the importance of the mental, something that the (Marxian) materialist either overlooks or subordinates in importance and sees as an epiphenomenon. However, the phenomenologist operates purely within the realm of the mental, accepting the idea that the mental world has an immanent logic of its own. While accepting the phenomenologist’s emphasis on mental phenomena, Mannheim sought the integration of “the real and the mental,” arguing that “there is something true in the materialist conception of history” (1925/1971:85, 86). In other words, Mannheim sought to integrate Marxian theory and phenomenology.

In addition to criticizing phenomenology for ignoring the real, material world, Mannheim was dissatisfied with its belief in “supratemporally valid truths,” such as the “transcendental ego” (1925/1971:80). In contrast, Mannheim was a historicist. Historicism leads to the view that there are no supratemporal truths, but rather “various essential meanings come into being together with the epochs to which they belong” (96). This historicism means that Mannheim was committed to the study of the social roots of knowledge in specific historical settings, as well as to the study of the changing relationship over time between ideas and their social sources.

**A Sociology of the Sociology of Knowledge**

Mannheim conducted a sociology-of-knowledge analysis of the rise of the sociology of knowledge. For example, he argued that the sociology of knowledge could not have arisen during a historical period (say, the Middle Ages) when there was social stability and substantial agreement, even unity, over worldviews. However, in more recent years this belief in unity has been destroyed, largely by the increase in social mobility. What increased mobility has done is “to reveal the multiplicity of styles of thought” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:7). Mannheim distinguished between horizontal and vertical mobility. Horizontal mobility leads people to see that other people think differently, but it does not lead them to question their own group’s knowledge system. Because people are moving horizontally, no group is “better” than any other. As a result, no thought system is seen as preferable to any other. However, vertical mobility leads people not only to see that others think differently, but also to be uncertain, even skeptical of their own group’s mode of thought. This uncertainty is especially likely to occur when one encounters different thought systems in groups that stand higher in the stratification system than one’s own. Vertical mobility also tends to lead to a “democratization” of thought whereby the ideas of the lower strata can come to confront those of the upper strata on more equal footing. More generally, all of this leads to the following questions:

How is it possible that identical human thought-processes concerned with the same world produce different conceptions of that world? And from this point it is only a step further to ask: Is it not possible
that the thought processes which are involved here are not at all identical? May it not be found … that there are numerous alternative paths which can be followed?

(Mannheim, 1929/1936:9)

These questions lead to a crisis in society in which there seems to be nothing to believe in, all ideas appear equal, and everything seems to be up for grabs. But in Mannheim’s view, this crisis, and the questions that led to it, also lead dialectically to the development of the field—the sociology of knowledge—that offers potential solutions to the crisis. However, Mannheim believed that there is some urgency for those interested in doing a sociology of knowledge in order to help cope with the crisis because “the opportunity may be lost, and the world will once again present a static, uniform, and inflexible countenance” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:85).

Relativism and Relationism

Mannheim contrasted the “relationism” that he preferred to see as characteristic of the sociology of knowledge with the “relativism” that he feared because it leads people to feel that there is nothing to believe in, that truth is “socially and historically conditioned” (Remmling, 1967:45; see also Goldman, 1994). Relativism leads to the viewpoint that there are no absolute standards by which one can judge right or wrong, good or bad, and so on. Relationism, on the other hand, is simply the idea that there is a relationship among specific ideas, the larger system of ideas of which they are part, and the social system in which they are found. To the relationist, the effort to discover truth independent of historical and social meanings is a “vain hope” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:80). Instead of searching for fixed, immutable ideas, Mannheim urged that we “learn to think dynamically and relationally rather than statically” (87). However, there are criteria of right and wrong, good and bad, but they cannot be formulated absolutely, once and for all. Such criteria can be defined for a given social situation and must be redefined anew with each change in social reality; “there is a moral obligation, but … this obligation is derived from the concrete situation to which it is related” (Mannheim, 1953:212). Said Mannheim, “The dynamic relationism for which I stand has nothing to do with nihilism…. It … does not despair of the solubility of the crisis of our existence and thought” (1929/1971:267).

The sociology of knowledge can be used nonevaluatively or evaluatively. It can be used nonevaluatively simply to analyze the relationship between a social situation and ideas, or it can be used evaluatively: “A theory … is wrong if in a given practical situation it uses concepts and categories which, if taken seriously, would prevent man from adjusting himself at that historical stage” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:95). Mannheim enumerated three examples of idea systems that could cause such maladjustment. The first is the continued existence of antiquated norms. The second is living by absolutes that may have applied to one social setting but that no longer apply to the changed social setting. Finally, there is the use of forms of knowledge that are no longer capable of comprehending present realities. This leads Mannheim to a new definition of the Marxian concept of false consciousness: “Knowledge is distorted and ideological when it fails to take account of the new realities applying to a situation, and when it attempts to conceal them by thinking of them in categories which are inappropriate” (96).

Relatedly, Mannheim asked how knowledge and objectivity are possible after it is recognized that any "given
finding should contain the traces of the position of the knower” (1931/1936:296). Mannheim responded that this reality should not be denied, but rather we should ask “how, granted these perspectives, knowledge and objectivity are still possible” (296). He responded with the argument that we need to juxtapose a series of partial perspectives in order to achieve a new level of objectivity. In so doing, we need to reject the positivistic idea that there is some detached, impersonal, ideal realm of truth, some “sphere of perfection” (297). Rather, we must strive to constantly enlarge our knowledge of what we are studying through the juxtaposition of a number of all-too-human partial perspectives. Furthermore, we can compare points of view and determine which one “gives evidence of the greatest comprehensiveness and the greatest fruitfulness in dealing with empirical material” (301).

The Intelligentsia

The changing nature of society produces a dramatic change in what Mannheim called the “intelligentsia,”3 or the “social groups whose special task it is to provide an interpretation of the world for that society” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:10; 1932/1993). In previous, static societies, the intelligentsia tended to be not only well defined but also “static and lifeless.” The members of the intelligentsia are oriented more by their own need to systematize ideas than by the need to use those ideas to deal with life’s concrete problems. In the modern world this closed intelligentsia has been replaced by what Mannheim called socially unattached (or free) intelligentsia (Loader, 1997). Today’s intelligentsia is derived from a number of different social strata, and its members are no longer rigidly organized or constrained by such an organization. As a result, “the intellectual’s illusion that there is only one way of thinking disappears” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:12). Thus, various groups of the intelligentsia, buying into different sets of ideas, openly compete with one another for the attention of the larger world.

The appearance and spread of a socially unattached intelligentsia has mixed implications. On the one hand, the intelligentsia has helped to produce the “profound disquietude” of Mannheim’s (1929/1936:13) day. That is, intellectuals, and people in general, no longer accept one system of ideas; society is a buzzing confusion of competing idea systems. On the other hand, it is the intelligentsia that is able to rise above the limitations of a restricted vision to find truth. It is from this new intelligentsia that the sociologist of knowledge emerged, and it is this sociologist who is in a distinctive position to offer a solution to the world’s intellectual chaos. According to Simonds:

Mannheim’s faith in the intellectuals is, then, a faith in the powers of the intellect to overcome the limitations of this or that personal experience as a ground of knowledge, to expand the self by engaging in authentic communication with others, to aspire to a more comprehensive view of our shared human condition by virtue of the communicative ability to gain access to contexts of thought other than the one into which we are born.

(Simonds, 1978:131)

Before it created the sociology of knowledge, this new intelligentsia created two other methods of thought and
investigation. One was *epistemology*, an immanent theory of knowledge that emerged out of a process of pure contemplation. The other was *psychology*, which focused on such things as the genesis of meaning within the individual. In different ways, both of these approaches were, from Mannheim’s point of view, guilty of separating the individual mind from the larger community. It is this error that the sociology of knowledge serves to correct. As Mannheim put it, “Knowledge is from the beginning a cooperative process of group life, in which everyone unfolds his knowledge within the framework of a common fate, a common activity, and the overcoming of common difficulties” (1929/1936:29).

The modern world has led not only to the realization that there is a multitude of views, but also to the desire, linked to Marx’s theory of ideology, to “unmask” the unconscious motivations that lie behind systems of ideas. This desire to see what lies behind idea systems has led to the sense that there is a “collective unconscious” that is the irrational foundation of systems of ideas. Intellectuals are not the only ones involved in the unmasking of these irrational foundations; members of all groups are involved in the unmasking of the ideas of those in other, often competing, groups. The result of all of this questioning is, again, the undermining of “man’s confidence in human thought in general” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:41). As a result of this inability to believe in anything, “more and more people took flight into skepticism and irrationalism” (41). This is one of the ways that Mannheim linked the intellectual and social crises of his day, especially the irrationalism associated with the rise of fascism. Hungry for something to believe in, people were vulnerable to the irrational idea systems put forth by the fascists.

Yet, dialectically, this process of unmasking not only creates a crisis, but again provides the basis for the resolution of that crisis. As Mannheim put it, “What seems so unbearable in life itself, namely, to continue to live with the unconscious uncovered, is the historical prerequisite of scientific critical self-awareness” (1929/1936:47). That is, it allows for greater insight into the social determination of knowledge, and such knowledge can provide the basis for emancipation from such social determination.

**Weltanschauung**

In his sociology of knowledge, Mannheim (1952/1971b) was generally not interested in isolated ideas and beliefs, but rather in getting at the *Weltanschauung*, or systematic totality of ideas of an epoch or group, which, in turn, is composed of a series of mutually interdependent parts. The *Weltanschauung* is more than the sum of its parts, but each of the parts can be studied to give us a sense of the *Weltanschauung*. But there is a dialectical relationship between the *Weltanschauung* and its parts: “We understand the whole from the part, and the part from the whole. We derive the ‘spirit of the epoch’ from its individual documentary manifestations on the basis of what we know about the spirit of the epoch” (Mannheim, 1952/1971b:49; italics added).

Mannheim saw three levels of meaning in cultural products such as knowledge. The objective level of meaning is that which is inherent in the product itself. The expressive level of meaning is what the actor intended in producing the product. Finally, and most important to Mannheim, the documentary meaning is that the product serves as a “document,” or allows us to get a sense, of the *Weltanschauung*. Mannheim was generally not interested in specific cultural products but rather what they allowed him to deduce about the *Weltanschauung* in which they exist. And he was not so much interested in unmasking individual ideas as he
was in “determining the functional role of any thought whatever” within the Weltanschauung (Mannheim, 1925/1971:69).

Functional analysis is key to Mannheim. He was interested not only in the functional relationship between specific ideas and the Weltanschauung, but also in the functional relationship between ideas and the larger social setting. One of Mannheim’s more important definitions of the sociology of knowledge is “a discipline which explores the functional dependence of each intellectual standpoint on the differentiated social group reality standing behind it, and which sets itself the task of retracing the evolution of the various standpoints” (Mannheim, 1925/1971:115). In doing a sociology of knowledge, Mannheim was doing a functional analysis; that is, he was viewing knowledge as a function of the social world from which it emanates and of the Weltanschauung of which it is part.

Steps in Practicing the Sociology of Knowledge

This definition led Mannheim to identify a series of steps involved in the practice of the sociology of knowledge. First, it is necessary to specify, for each historical period under study, “the various systematic intellectual standpoints on which the thinking of creative individuals and groups was based” (Mannheim, 1925/1971:114). Second, the sociologist is to explore the “non-theoretical, vital roots” of these standpoints by uncovering “the hidden metaphysical premises of the various systematic positions; then we must ask further which of the ‘world postulates’ coexisting in a given epoch are the correlates of a given style of thought” (114). Third, in uncovering the latter we will, in the process, have identified the various intellectual strata at work at a given point in time. It is Mannheim’s view that these intellectual strata will be in conflict with one another in an effort to gain preeminence for a particular Weltanschauung. Finally, there is what Mannheim considered the sociological task proper:

finding the social strata making up the intellectual strata in question. It is only in terms of these latter strata within the overall process, in terms of their attitudes toward the emerging new reality, that we can define the fundamental aspirations and world postulates existing at a given time which can absorb already existing ideas and methods and subject them to a change of function—not to speak of new created forms.

(Mannheim, 1925/1971:114)

In other words, the basic task of the sociology of knowledge is getting at the nature of the social group that lies at the base of the intelligentsia as well as the idea systems under consideration.

As we have seen, for a variety of reasons Mannheim saw his era as being in the midst of an intellectual crisis. It is in the context of this crisis that Mannheim dealt with two of his most important ideas—ideology and utopia. Mannheim saw them as characterizing the “final intensification of the intellectual crisis” (1929/1936:39–40). Let us look now in some detail at what Mannheim said about these two idea systems.
Ideology and Utopia

Mannheim’s most systematic thoughts on the concepts of ideology and utopia are to be found, not surprisingly, in his best-known work, *Ideology and Utopia* (Mannheim, 1929/1936; Kettler and Meja, 1994; B. Turner, 1995).

Ideology

We have already encountered a few of Mannheim’s thoughts on ideology in our discussion of the roots of the sociology of knowledge in Marx’s theory of ideology. An ideology, as well as a utopia, is a system of ideas, a *Weltanschauung*. An *ideology* is a set of ideas that “conceals the present by attempting to comprehend it in terms of the past” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:97). A *utopia*, in contrast, is a set of ideas that “transcends the present and is oriented to the future” (97). Those who use ideologies are attempting to defend the status quo by obscuring certain things about it, whereas those who use utopias are endeavoring to overthrow the status quo by emphasizing the advantages of an alternative social form. Those who adopt a utopia are seeking a goal “which seems to be unrealizable only from the point of view of a given social order which is already in existence” (196). Thus, there is always a fundamental conflict of interest between those accepting a utopia and those buying into an ideology.

In fact, it is usually the opposing group that labels a set of ideas as either an ideology or a utopia: “It is always the dominant group which is in full accord with the existing order that determines what is to be regarded as utopian, while the ascendant group which is in conflict with things as they are is the one that determines what is regarded as ideological” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:203). In this sense, “ideology” and “utopia” are labels that one group places on the ideas of an opposing group.

For him to be able to judge whether ideas are ideological or utopian, Mannheim needed a more objective base point, and that is provided by his concept of *adequate* ideas: “Ideas which correspond to the concretely existing and *de facto* order are designated as ‘adequate’ and situationally congruous. These are relatively rare and only a state of mind that has been sociologically fully clarified operates with situationally congruous ideas and motives” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:194). In contrast to those ideas that are “properly” rooted in the present, there are ideas that are anchored in the past (ideologies) and in the future (utopias). It can be very difficult to judge what category a specific complex of ideas fits into, but Mannheim felt that it can be done by an external observer. But Mannheim was forced to admit, “To determine concretely, however, what in a given case is ideological and what utopian [as well as ‘adequate’] is extremely difficult” (196).

One of the complicating factors in making this judgment is the fact that in historical reality, the two are not clearly separated from one another. For example, “The utopias of ascendant classes are often, to a large extent, permeated with ideological elements” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:203). Another is that the noise of partisan conflict serves to make it unclear which ideas are utopian and which are ideological. As a result, Mannheim is forced to conclude that the only way one can really tell whether one is dealing with an ideology or with a utopia is with the hindsight of history: “Ideas which later turned out to have been only distorted
representations of a past or potential social order were ideological, while those which were adequately realized in the succeeding social order were relative utopias” (204).

Judged from the point of view of adequate ideas, both ideologies and utopias are distorted mental structures. One task of the sociologist of knowledge is to unmask the distortions in the two idea systems. More important, the objective is the uncovering of their social sources. Most generally, the goal of the sociologist of knowledge is to “attempt to escape ideological and utopian distortions … a quest for reality” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:98). Only the external observer, the socially unattached intellectual, the sociologist of knowledge, is able to discover this undistorted social reality.

Mannheim distinguished between the particular and the total conception of ideology (Kettler and Meja, 2001). Particular ideologies refer to the ideas of our opponents and are typically seen as conscious distortions. Total ideologies are the ideas of a concrete sociohistorical group, or even of an entire age or epoch, and are not typically viewed as involving conscious distortions. Mannheim drew three other distinctions between particular and total ideologies. First, in the case of a particular ideology, only a portion of an opponent’s idea system is considered ideological, whereas in a total ideology, an opponent’s entire Weltanschauung is thought to be ideological. Second, in the case of a particular ideology, opposing groups continue to share some ideas, such as the basic standards of validity. In contrast, the total ideologies of opposing groups differ on everything; they are “fundamentally divergent thought-systems” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:57). Third, the study of particular ideologies involves a psychological analysis of the interests of those involved with the idea system. The study of total ideologies involves a functional (or sociological) analysis in which there is a study of the “correspondence between a given social situation and a given perspective” (58). Thus, a particular ideology is in line with the way Marxists use the term ideology, whereas total ideology reflects the orientation of the sociology of knowledge.

The Marxists, of course, used the idea of ideology to critique and discredit the views of the capitalists. However, as Weber pointed out, those same tools can be used to analyze Marxian thinking: “The materialist conception of history is not to be compared to a cab that one can enter or alight from at will, for once they enter it, even revolutionaries themselves are not free to leave it” (Weber, cited in Mannheim, 1929/1936:74). Or, in Mannheim’s terms, “Nothing was to prevent the opponents of Marxism from availing themselves of the weapon and applying it to Marxism itself” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:75). Ultimately, of course, everyone could use the total conception of ideology and apply it to any and all idea systems. Crucial in Mannheim’s eyes is the willingness and the ability to apply the total conception of ideology not only to other idea systems, but to one’s own idea system as well.

**Utopia**

Although Mannheim’s thinking on ideology is deeply tied to its Marxian roots, his thinking on utopia, as well as on its relationship to ideology, is more original. A utopia, like an ideology, is incongruous with reality. However, what distinguishes a utopia is the fact that it not only “transcends reality” but also “breaks the bond of the existing reality” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:192). Although utopias are revolutionary ideas, they can affect action, which will “tend to shatter either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time” (192).
Mannheim has a dialectical view of utopias (and most other things). An existing order tends to give birth to a series of "unrealized and unfulfilled tendencies which represent the needs of each age" (Mannheim, 1929/1936:199). That is, dialectically, a given social order has within it the seeds of its own destruction. Mannheim saw these ideas as "explosive material" capable of overturning the extant order. When these revolutionary ideas are transformed into action, they are capable of breaking "the bonds of the existing order, leaving it free to develop in the direction of the next order of existence" (199). When that "next" order of existence comes into being, the stage is presumably set for the process to begin again with the rise of the next set of utopian ideas.

Of course, all utopian ideas must overcome the opposition of countervailing ideologies. Ideologies serve to protect the existing social order, whereas utopias perform "the function of bursting the bonds of the existing order" (Mannheim, 1929/1936:206). The group espousing a utopia may, in fact, achieve power and come to be the dominant group within society. In that case, the utopian mentality can reach its end point; that is, it becomes "completely infused into every aspect of the dominating mentality of the time" (209). However, because the group carrying the idea has come into power, the utopia is gradually transformed into an ideology that sooner or later gives birth to one or more counter-utopias.

Where does a utopia come from? Mannheim made it clear that a utopia can emerge from a single individual: "It happens very often that the dominant utopia first arises as the wish-fantasy of a single individual and does not until later become imported into the political aims of a more inclusive group" (Mannheim, 1929/1936:209). Following Weber, Mannheim saw such an individual as "charismatic." However, the utopian ideas of the charismatic individual must, in order to survive and succeed, be in touch with the collective problems of the day and be linked in various ways with some group. For one thing, the ideas of the individual must be in accord with the collective impulse of a larger group. In other words, the individual must be giving expression to sentiments that are already present as currents within a collectivity. For another, more important thing, in order for the utopia to be effective in tearing asunder the existing order, the ideas must be taken up by some group and translated by it into action. In other words, individuals are not capable of social revolution; only a group can bring about such a revolution. Although, as we saw earlier, many groups can espouse utopias and bring about social revolutions, in the last resort social classes are the most important of these groups. In spite of the centrality of social classes, we should not lose sight of the fact that utopias can be produced by other social groups. As Mannheim put it, "The key to the intelligibility of utopias is the structural situation of the social stratum which at any given time espouses them" (208).

Mannheim identified four historical ideal types of utopias. The first is orgiastic chiliasm. Chiliasts tend to be irrational, unreflective, ecstatic-orgiastic, and, like all utopians, oriented to transcending the existing world. The carriers of this utopia are members of the lowest strata within society. The second type is the liberal-humanitarian utopia, carried by the middle strata of bourgeoisie and intellectuals. The utopian image here is of a more rational future toward which we are gradually moving. Third is the conservative utopia (discussed later in this chapter), which develops in reaction to the liberal-humanistic and chiliastic utopias. The utopian goal here is a world in which everything that does exist continues to exist. Great value is placed on things that are derived from the past and that continue to exist in the present. Conservative utopian ideas tend to be
carried by those groups that have made it in society and are interested in protecting their position. Finally, there is the socialist-communist utopia. The goal of this type is the overthrow of the present society and the creation of a classless society. The carrier is the proletariat, or other ascendant social groups.

When he looked at the contemporary world, Mannheim tended to see the demise of utopias, and he seemed to regret their disappearance greatly. Why do utopias tend to disappear? For one thing, as we have seen, when a group espousing a utopia moves into established positions, it tends to adapt its ideas to the existing reality. A second factor is the warfare among utopias and the fact that “different coexistent forms of utopian mentality are destroying one another in reciprocal conflict” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:250). Finally, out of this conflict of utopias, and the propensity toward critical examination of one another’s idea systems, is the more general tendency toward critical analysis of the historical and social roots of all ideas, including utopian ideas.

The result of all this is that our earlier utopias have come to be nothing more than a number of different points of view. We are left with a series of atomistic viewpoints; we are left without a comprehensive view of the world. To put it another way, with the demise of utopias comes the disappearance of total points of view.

Disenchantment

Mannheim went further and, in another viewpoint that resembles Weberian theory, tended to see a progressive disenchantment of the world. In this case, we are seeing the disappearance of both utopias and ideologies; we are moving toward a world in which “all ideas have been discredited and all utopias have been destroyed” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:256). In an excellent description of the disenchantment of the world, Mannheim described the movement toward the “complete destruction of all spiritual elements, the utopian as well as the ideological … emergence of a ‘matter of factness’ … in sexual life, art, and architecture, and the expression of the natural impulses in sports” (256).

In spite of this progressive disenchantment of the world, Mannheim argued that this disenchantment is to be regretted because people need utopias (and ideologies). As Mannheim put it:

It is possible, therefore, that in the future, in a world in which there is never anything new, in which all is finished and each moment is a repetition of the past, there can exist a condition in which thought will be utterly devoid of all ideological and utopian elements. But the complete elimination of reality-transcending elements from our world would lead us to a “matter-of-factness” which ultimately would mean the decay of the human will.

(Mannheim, 1929/1936:262)

Yet, although Mannheim regretted the progressive disappearance of both ideologies and utopias, it is the demise of the latter that is the far greater problem. The reason is that although the death of an ideology would pose a crisis for the social strata espousing it, the disappearance of utopias would have a profoundly negative effect on human nature and human development as a whole:
The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would be faced then with the greatest paradox imaginable, namely that man, who has achieved the highest degree of rational mastery of existence, left without any ideals, becomes a mere creature of impulses. Thus, after a long tortuous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man’s own creation, with the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it.

(Mannheim, 1929/1936:262–263)

**Hope for the Future**

The hope for the future lies in the fact that there are still two groups that are capable of instilling the world with tension. First, there are the “strata whose aspirations are not yet fulfilled” and the fact that they “will always cause the counter-utopias to rekindle and flare up again” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:257). Mannheim associated the strata whose aspirations are unfulfilled with the proletariat and its communist utopia, and the major counter-utopia with conservatism. However, when looked at from the vantage point of the world of the century, although there are certainly still strata whose aspirations remain unfulfilled, there is little or no faith in communism or socialism as viable alternatives to the extant system. It seems clear that the strata are still there, but at the moment they are lacking a utopian vision.

The other group that offers some hope as far as Mannheim was concerned is his favored “socially unattached intellectuals.” This group of intellectuals, which has always existed to some degree, is seen by Mannheim as expanding. They are being drawn from all strata of society not just the privileged classes; they are increasingly separated from the rest of society and are increasingly dependent on their own resources. Four alternatives are open to such intellectuals. First, they can affiliate themselves with radical socialists and communists. Second, they can become skeptics dedicated to the elimination of all ideology. Third, they can orient themselves romantically to the past and attempt to “revive religious feeling, idealism, symbols, and myths” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:259). Finally, they can renounce the world, as well as any interest in radical politics. However, in choosing the latter alternative, intellectuals become part of the problem rather than a potential solution, because they then come to “take part in the great historical process of disillusionment” (259–260). It seems clear that Mannheim preferred the second alternative as the course to be taken by the intelligentsia.
Rationality and the Irrationality of the Times

Mannheim, very much influenced by the work of Weber (and Simmel), developed a theory of rationality which, among other things, allowed him to deal with many of the problems of his day under the heading of irrationality. In *Ideology and Utopia* (1929/1936), Mannheim offered a gross differentiation between rationality and irrationality, which he refined later in his work. In that early work, the *rational* sphere of society was defined as “consisting of settled and routinized procedures in dealing with situations that recur in an orderly fashion” (113). The *irrational* sphere was defined residually, although Mannheim made it clear that it continued to be more prevalent than the rational sectors of society: “Rationalized as our life may seem to have become, all the rationalizations that have taken place so far are merely partial since the most important realms of our social life are even now anchored in the irrational” (115). The economy, for example, was still dominated by irrational free competition rather than having become a more rational planned economy. Similarly, in the stratification system, one’s place was still determined by competition and struggle, not by objective tests that decided one’s position within that system. And in politics, planning had not yet been able to eliminate the struggle for dominance at the national and international levels.

Although the irrational continued to predominate, Mannheim seemed to imply that rationalization is a process that had invaded various sectors of society and that others were likely to come under its sway in the future. In other words, the irrational is likely to retreat in the face of the forward march of the rational. As Mannheim put it, “The chief characteristic of modern culture is the tendency to include as much as possible in the realm of the rational and to bring it under administrative control—and, on the other hand, to reduce the ‘irrational’ element to the vanishing point” (1929/1936:114).

Mannheim was forced to back away from this optimistic view in his later work in the face of the increasing prevalence of such irrationalities as economic depression, war, fascism, and so on. It became increasingly hard in Mannheim’s day to argue that irrationalities were in the process of disappearing. If anything, the opposite seemed to be the case. As we will see, Mannheim came to feel that rationality could not be left to advance on its own but had to be helped along through planning. Furthermore, as he came to refine his sense of rationality, he came to see that the forward march of at least one type of rationality may in fact be a major cause of at least some of these irrationalities (more on this shortly).

Rationalization, for Mannheim, involves behavior that is in accord with some rational structure or framework. Rational actors follow definite prescriptions “entailing no personal decision whatsoever” (Mannheim, 1929/1936:115). The image is of the actor following the dictates of some larger, bureaucratically organized structure, and this image is supported by the examples offered by Mannheim—petty officials, judges, factory workers, and so on. Rational action is contrasted to conduct, which begins “where rationalization has not yet penetrated, and where we are forced to make decisions in situations which have as yet not been subjected to regulation” (115; italics added). In this early work, conduct is clearly associated with the irrational realm. It is also clear that Mannheim held the view that conduct, like irrationality more generally, will sooner or later come to be limited or even eliminated by the process of rationalization.
Mannheim was ambivalent on this process of rationalization. On the one hand, he clearly favored the progressive rationalization of sectors that, before his time, had been dominated by the irrational. Because they would come to be controlled by administrative dictates, irrational decisions and actions would be reduced or eliminated. On the other hand, Mannheim could not really want a world in which all decisions are controlled—in which there is no personal decision making, no personal freedom, whatsoever.

Types of Rationality and Irrationality

Mannheim had much more to say about rationality and irrationality in one of the essays included in *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (1935/1940). Here he argued that both rationality and irrationality can be subdivided into the substantial and the functional. Substantial rationality and irrationality deal with thinking, whereas functional rationality and irrationality are concerned with action. Substantial rationality, then, is defined as “an act of thought which reveals intelligent insight into the inter-relations of events in a given situation” (Mannheim, 1935/1940:53). Adopting again a residual notion of irrationality, Mannheim defined substantial irrationality as “everything else which either is false or not an act of thought at all (as for example drives, impulses, wishes and feelings, both conscious and unconscious)” (53). This clearly is a very different sense of the distinction between rational and irrational, since previously Mannheim had associated rationality with the lack of thought, whereas here substantial irrationality involves a lack of thought. However, previously the lack of thought had been associated with administrative control, whereas in the case of substantial irrationality it is linked to drives, impulses, wishes, and feelings.

Mannheim came closer to his earlier sense of rationality in his definition of functional rationality as “a series of actions … organized in such a way that it leads to a previously defined goal, every element in this series of actions receiving a functional position and role” (Mannheim, 1935/1940:53). The series of actions is functionally rational in that each has a role to play in the achievement of the ultimate goal, although the goal itself can be either rational or irrational. Thus, for example, salvation is defined as an irrational goal, but it can be sought through a series of functionally rational actions.

Mannheim’s concept of functional rationality has much in common with Weber’s sense of formal rationality. For example, efficiency is a central characteristic of rationality from Weber’s point of view, and Mannheim argued that a “functional organization of a series of actions will, moreover, be at its best when, in order to attain the given goal, it coordinates the means most efficiently” (1935/1940:53).

Interestingly, to Mannheim functional and substantive rationality may be substitutes for, or even in conflict with, one another. For example, a soldier may act in accord with the functional organization of the military without thinking through his or her action. In fact, a functional organization like the military often wants its members to act in accord with its dictates and *not* to think things through on their own.

Finally, functional irrationality is defined, once again residually, as “everything which breaks through and disrupts functional ordering” (Mannheim, 1935/1940:54). Violence committed by unruly individuals is an example of functional irrationality. The functionally rational actions of those in one organization can also be functionally irrational from the point of view of those in another organization. For example, when state
officials raise taxes on corporations, those taxes may be seen as functionally irrational from the perspective of those in such businesses. Thus, “functional irrationality’ never characterizes an act itself but only with reference to its position in the entire complex of conduct of which it is part” (55).

Weber was most interested in the spread of formal rationality in the West, and Mannheim had a similar level of concern for, and offered a similar hypothesis about, the spread of functional rationality:

The more industrialized a society is and the more advanced its division of labour and organization, the greater will be the number of spheres of human activity which will be functionally rational and hence also calculable in advance. Whereas the individual in earlier societies acted only occasionally and in limited spheres in a functionally rational manner, in contemporary society he is compelled to act in this way in more and more spheres of life.

(Mannheim, 1935/1940:55; italics added)

Mannheim went beyond functional rationalization to posit the intimately related phenomenon of self-rationalization, or “the individual’s systematic control of his impulses” (Mannheim, 1935/1940:55). In fact, self-rationalization is sometimes described as a type of functional rationalization, and in any case the two are closely linked—“the functional rationalization of objective activities ultimately evokes self-rationalization” (56). There is a high level of rationalization when functional rationalization and self-rationalization occur together. This situation is most likely to arise in the administrative staff of large organizations. Here the external control of the organization’s rules and regulations is supplemented by self-rationalization, especially in the case of staff members and their careers. In Mannheim’s words, the career prescribes “not only the actual processes of work but also the prescriptive regulation both of the ideas and feelings one is permitted to have and of one’s leisure time” (56). Thus, self-regulation exerts control over matters (ideas, feelings, leisure time) that functional rationalization cannot reach.

However, self-rationalization is not the highest and most extreme form of rationalization. That honor goes to what Mannheim called self-observation. Self-rationalization involves a process of mental training, subordinating my inner motives to an external aim. Self-observation, on the other hand, is more than such form of mental training. Self-observation aims primarily at inner self-transformation. Man reflects about himself and his actions mostly for the sake of remoulding or transforming himself more radically.

(Mannheim, 1935/1940:57)

Mannheim thus seems to have envisioned a hierarchy running from substantial rationalization to functional rationalization, self-rationalization, and, ultimately, self-observation. Although in the earlier stages of modernity, society may have been able to rely on functional rationalization, more complex and rapidly changing modern societies require self-rationalization and especially self-observation, which control people
better and more efficiently and enable them to adapt more readily to complex new situations.

Returning to his central concepts, Mannheim argued that industrialization has led to an increase in functional rationalization, but not necessarily substantial rationalization. In fact, Mannheim went further by arguing that functional rationalization has tended to “paralyze” substantial rationalization by leaving people less and less room to utilize their independent judgment. This idea seems to be Mannheim's version of Weber’s irrationality of rationality. That is, the irrational consequence of the spread of functional rationality is the decline of substantial rationality. Here Mannheim differentiated between those at the top of the organization and those below them. Those at the top tend to retain substantial rationality, whereas the substantial rationality of those below them declines as the responsibility for decision making is turned over to those at the top. This process has disastrous consequences for a person who does not occupy a high-level, decision-making position:

He becomes increasingly accustomed to being led by others and gradually gives up his own interpretation of events for those others give him. When the rationalized mechanism of social life collapses in terms of crisis, the individual cannot repair it by his own insight. Instead his own impotence reduces him to a state of terrified helplessness.

(Mannheim, 1935/1940:59)

Another irrationality of rationality stems from the fact that because of industrialization, great masses of people are crowded together in large cities. In other words, industrialization brings with it the creation of what has come to be called “mass society.” Thus, paradoxically, as large-scale industrial society produces increases in functional rationality, self-rationalization, and self-observation, it also creates the conditions in mass society for irrational threats to that rational system:

It produces all the irrationalities and emotional outbreaks which are characteristic of amorphous human agglomerations. As an industrial society, it so refines the social mechanism that the slightest irrational disturbance can have the most far-reaching effects, and as a mass society it favors a great number of irrational impulses and suggestions and produces an accumulation of unsublimated psychic energies which, at every moment, threatens to smash the whole subtle machinery of social life.

(Mannheim, 1935/1940:61)

Although Mannheim retained the view that irrationality is not always a problem, in the modern world irrationalities are finding their way into places where rational planning and control are indispensable.

Thus, in Mannheim’s view, the basic sources of the irrational in modern life are the same as the sources of the formally rational. In other words, Mannheim offered a sociological, not a psychological, theory of the origins of both rationality and irrationality. He saw the sources of both as being built into the structure of modern society:
They are driven, now in one direction, now in another by the dual nature of the social structure that certain human beings are now calculating creatures who work out their actions to the very last detail, and now volcanic ones who think it right that at a given time they should reveal the worst depths of human brutality and sadism.

(Mannheim, 1935/1940:66)

There is another dialectical aspect to Mannheim’s thinking. That is, increasing formal rationality leads not only to an increase in certain irrationalities, but also to the beginning of a rational sense that *planning* is needed to deal with these problems—not just piecemeal planning, but rather planning at the level of the whole of society. The rationalization of society, as well as its growing irrationality, has made planning inevitable, but the issue is: Who will do that planning? Those who represent narrow interest groups? Or those who have the interests of society as a whole in mind? Clearly, Mannheim preferred that the latter do the planning, and either they are sociologists or they have the kind of totalistic perspective that only sociology can offer.
Criticisms and Contemporary Applications

Mannheim’s reputation is based on the fact that he is credited with inventing a subfield of sociology that remains viable to this day. However, much of the work that he did under that heading has come under severe attack (Meja and Stehr, 1990).

Merton (1941/1957) got to the heart of the matter with two devastating criticisms of Mannheim’s work. The first is that in a body of work designed to create and legitimize the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim never offered a clear-cut definition of what he meant by knowledge. As Merton put it, “Knowledge is at times regarded so broadly as to include every type of assertion and every mode of thought from folkloristic maxims to rigorous positive science” (1941/1957:497). Along the same lines, Mannheim sometimes used other terms to describe his field of concern. For example, he wrote about the “sociology of the mind,” defined as the “study of mental functions in the context of action” (Mannheim, 1956/2001:20). Unclear about knowledge, Mannheim was also obscure on the relationship between knowledge and society. According to Merton, Mannheim is guilty of a “failure to specify the type or mode of relations between social structure and knowledge” (1941/1957:498).

Merton offers a second criticism, one that most analysts of Mannheim’s work make. This criticism is that, in spite of various efforts, Mannheim never did solve the problem of relativism (Goldman, 1994). It appears that a consequence of Mannheim’s approach is that it is impossible to believe in anything fully, including Mannheim’s own views, because all ideas emanate from inherently limited positions in society.

In addition to Merton’s critique, there is also a troublesome elitism and conservatism about Mannheim’s ideas. He seemed to have little regard for the masses and saw them as a potential threat to modern society. He saw the need for elites to run society. For example, he argued that “democracy is characterized, not by the absence of elite strata, but rather by a new mode of elite selection and a new self-interpretation of the elite” (Mannheim, 1956/1971:300). Later, he saw the need for elite planners to come up with designs for society so that it could avoid the looming disasters. However, all this requires trust in the elites and the planners. How is society to control them? What is to prevent them from forming the kind of fascistic regime that Mannheim so feared and detested?

We close this chapter with some thoughts on the point with which we began—that Mannheim was not a grand theorist in the tradition of Weber or Marx. That is, Mannheim’s contributions have been restricted largely to the sociology of knowledge and did not involve a grand theory of society. Although there is much truth in this position, it can be argued that the sociology of knowledge is about more than just knowledge; rather, it is relevant to all sociocultural phenomena. That is, all cultural products can, indeed must, be analyzed in the same way that knowledge is analyzed by Mannheim. In this sense, Mannheim can be seen as a pioneer of the hermeneutic approach in sociology (Loader, 2011). More specifically, his work on knowledge can be seen as an exemplar for similar work on the full panoply of cultural phenomena.

This brings us to a number of contemporary applications of Mannheim’s work. As argued throughout,
Mannheim founded the area of study called the sociology of knowledge. Although contemporary practitioners of the sociology of knowledge continue to refer to Mannheim’s work, they nevertheless note that the field has moved beyond his basic ideas (McCarthy, 2007). According to E. Doyle McCarthy (2007: 2483), Mannheim focused on “relativism and the social location of ideas and ideology.” In contrast, the new sociology of knowledge does not focus solely on the “study of conflicting ideologies” but rather tries to understand “the tacit and taken-for-granted understandings of everyday life” (2483). Here knowledge is not simply a by-product of social location, but a system of meaning that needs be understood on its own terms. To this end, the new sociologists of knowledge enhance Mannheim’s insights through the use of theories like phenomenology, hermeneutics, social constructionism, and semiotics (the study of sign systems). These differences aside, the sociology of knowledge consistently examines the idea that our knowledge of the world is not a reflection of untouchable truths (religious, scientific, or otherwise). Rather, ideas are human constructions that can be understood for the social ends that they enable and achieve.

Also, Mannheim’s theory of generations has been influential. As noted earlier, Mannheim held the view that members of a generation share common concerns and ways of thinking. June Edmunds and Bryan Turner (2005) have applied this idea to the phenomenon of globalization. They have pointed out that an important component of Mannheim’s work on generations is the role that trauma plays in consolidating generational consciousness. Whereas Mannheim focused on trauma experienced by members of a single nation-state, Edmunds and Turner (2005:564) have argued that “there are reasons to suppose that globally experienced traumatic events may facilitate the development of global generations.” Examples of global events that have defined generations include the Vietnam War and 9/11:

The New York attacks could create a “9/11 Generation” that will be conscious of the negative effects of terrorism on their life-chances (for travel, urban security, global employment, civil liberties, national identity and relationship to religious movements and the Third World), thereby dividing them from the 1960s generation which experienced the global world, especially after the Cold War, as an open space.

(Edmunds and Turner, 2005:571)

This kind of generational global consciousness is facilitated by the development of electronic mass media such as television and the Internet, the formation of which is led by “new, global, public intellectuals” (565). Whereas Edmunds and Turner focus on global consciousness produced by events of recent origin, this idea of generational consciousness is also applicable to historical events that are only now coming to public consciousness. We have in mind here generational trauma associated with the colonization of indigenous populations and the creation of residential schooling systems in countries such as Canada.
Summary

Karl Mannheim’s theoretical work does not have the broad sweep of most of the other theorists covered in this book. However, his work did lead to the creation and development of an important field in contemporary sociology—the sociology of knowledge, or the study of the “existential determination of knowledge.”

In creating the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim drew on a number of sources—most important, Karl Marx’s ideas on ideologies. However, unlike Marx, Mannheim did not see ideologies as necessarily involving conscious distortions or emanating from social classes. Mannheim demonstrated that ideologies could emanate from generations (and other social sources) just as they could from social classes.

Mannheim focused on knowledge, approaching it from a sociological point of view. He was interested in studying knowledge empirically, especially using historical methods. Although he was interested in empirical research, Mannheim rejected the excesses of positivism. Among other things, he did not think that positivism was well suited to the study of ideas. Mannheim accepted much of the phenomenological approach, although he criticized phenomenology for ignoring material reality and for its search for ahistorical truths.

Mannheim saw a crisis in his time—relativism—in which all ideas seem to be equal and there appears to be nothing to believe in. However, he saw the sociology of knowledge arising out of this milieu and offering solutions to the problems associated with relativism. In contrast to the lack of absolute standards to make judgments associated with relativism, Mannheim saw the sociology of knowledge as characterized by relationism, or the idea that there is a relationship among specific ideas, larger idea systems, and the social system. Although this idea leads to the view that there are no eternal standards, there are standards specific to a given context that allow one to judge right and wrong. The intelligentsia, which plays a key role in Mannheim’s thinking, is the group best able to make these kinds of judgments because it is the most capable of rising above a specific, limited viewpoint.

In his sociology of knowledge, Mannheim was generally not interested in specific ideas, but rather in the Weltanschauung—the systematic totality of ideas of an epoch or group. Much of this chapter focuses on three examples of a Weltanschauung that were of central importance to Mannheim—ideology, utopia, and conservatism. An ideology is a set of ideas that conceals the present by attempting to understand it in terms of the past, whereas a utopia is an idea system that endeavors to transcend the present and is oriented to the future. Mannheim emphasized the fundamental conflict of interest among these two idea systems. Ideology and utopia are treated more generically, but conservatism is dealt with mainly in terms of its development in the first half of the nineteenth century. The confrontation of ideas is as important in Mannheim’s thinking about conservatism as it is in the relationship between ideology and utopia.

Mannheim offered a number of important insights into the idea of rationality. Most important is his distinction between substantive and functional rationality and irrationality. He placed great importance on the increase in functional rationalization, and its extension in the form of self-rationalization and, ultimately, self-observation. The chief irrationality of the increase in functional rationality is that it tends to paralyze
substantive rationality. Mannheim also worried about the irrationalities associated with mass society.
Notes

1. Although a posthumous book misleadingly titled *Systematic Sociology: An Introduction to the Study of Society* (Mannheim, 1957) was published, this book was based on Mannheim’s lectures and did not offer an overarching theoretical perspective.

2. More generally, both Weber and Mannheim were part of the German hermeneutic tradition known as *Geisteswissenschaften*.

3. Mannheim took this idea from the work of Max Weber’s brother, Alfred, a noted scholar of his day.
15 George Herbert Mead
The social psychological theories of George Herbert Mead were shaped by a variety of intellectual sources (Huebner, 2014; Joas, 1985, 2001; Shalin, 2011). These included Darwinism, comparative psychology, American pragmatism, psychological behaviorism, and German romantic idealism. Mead was trained as a philosopher, but he was attuned to key developments in the natural and social sciences. Combining these varied interests, Mead viewed human beings as organisms that develop within natural and cultural environments. In particular the ability to use symbols allows humans to take the perspective of other persons and in so doing to develop a self. Consequently, for Mead, entities like mind, intelligence, and self are not individual possessions (as is often assumed in psychology). Instead, they are social phenomena that emerge out of the interactions between persons. Mead offered a theory of self and social action that is both embodied (i.e., social actions occur within concrete meaningful environments) and relational (i.e., social actions emerge out of the interaction between persons).

Today Mead is primarily remembered as the founding figure of symbolic interactionism, one of the most important approaches to contemporary social psychology. Despite this, Mead did not actually use the term symbolic interactionism himself, but rather Herbert Blumer (1969), a key advocate of Mead’s ideas, coined the term. Even though Mead is viewed, by some, as the most important social theorist of the early twentieth century (Shalin, 2011), he never taught a sociology course, and the book for which he is most remembered, Mind, Self and Society (1934/1962), was compiled from notes produced by students in his course on Advanced Social Psychology. Daniel Huebner (2014:3) emphasized the oddity of Mead’s significant impact on sociology when he wrote, “Put in admittedly oversimplified terms, Mead is known in a discipline in which he did not teach for a book he did not write.”

All of this makes Mead a tremendously interesting sociological theorist not only for his ideas but also for our understanding of how sociological knowledge is produced and canonized. Previous chapters on the Early Women Sociologists (Chapter 10) and W. E. B. Du Bois (Chapter 11) demonstrated how certain ideas and theorists were excluded from the sociological canon based on factors such as gender and race. A study of Mead’s reception into the discipline of sociology demonstrates another aspect of the knowledge production process, namely, how “dominant understandings” of a theorist are produced (Huebner, 2014:141). Although in this chapter we focus on those dominant, primarily social psychological, understandings of Mead’s thought, it should be remembered that his interests were varied and complex.
Intellectual Roots

Behaviorism

Mead defined behaviorism in its broadest sense as “simply an approach to the study of the experience of the individual from the point of view of his conduct” (1934/1962:2; italics added). (Conduct is used here as another word for behavior.) Mead had no trouble with this approach to behaviorism, but he did have difficulty with the way in which behaviorism came to be defined and practiced by the most prominent behaviorist of Mead’s day, John B. Watson (Buckley, 1989).

The behaviorism of Mead’s time, as practiced by Watson and most others and then applied to humans, had been imported from animal psychology, where it worked quite well. There it was based on the premise that it is impossible through introspection to get at the private, mental experiences (assuming they exist) of lower animals and therefore all that can and should be done is to focus on animal behavior. Rather than seek to adapt behaviorism to the fact that there are obvious mental differences between animals and humans, Watson simply applied the principles of animal behavior to humans. To Watson, people were little more than “organic machines” (Buckley, 1989:x). Given this view of people and the analogy between humans and animals, Watson rejected the idea of the study of human consciousness by introspection or any other method. As Mead put it, in colorful fashion, “John B. Watson’s attitude was that of the Queen in Alice in Wonderland —‘Off with their heads!’” (1934/1962:2–3).

In Mead’s view, Watson sought to use behavior (conduct) to explain individual experience, without a concern for inner experience, consciousness, and mental imagery. In contrast, Mead believed that even inner experience can be studied from the point of view of the behaviorist, as long as this viewpoint is not narrowly conceived. Thus, Mead was a behaviorist, albeit what he called a “social” behaviorist. However, this seemingly slight extension makes an enormous theoretical difference. The symbolic-interactionist theory that emerged, in significant part from Mead’s theory, is very different from behaviorist theories (such as early exchange theory).

Although Mead wanted to include what goes on within the mind as part of social behaviorism, he was as opposed as was Watson to the use of introspection to study mental processes. Mead wanted to study the mind behavioristically, rather than introspectively:

The opposition of the behaviorist to introspection is justified. It is not a fruitful undertaking from the point of view of psychological study…. What the behaviorist is occupied with, and what we have to come back to, is the actual reaction itself, and it is only in so far as we can translate the content of introspection over into response that we can get any satisfactory psychological doctrine.

(Mead, 1934/1962:105; italics added)

Instead of studying the mind introspectively, Mead focused on the act or, if other people are involved, the
social act. Acts are behaviors defined in part in terms of the behaviorists’ notions of stimulus and response. That is, some external stimulus causes the person to respond with an act. Mead's extension here was to argue that "part of the act lies within the organism and only comes to expression later; it is that side of behavior which I think Watson has passed over" (1934/1962:6). Mead did not ignore the inner experience of the individual, because that inner experience is part, indeed a crucial part, of the act (we say more about the act shortly). It is in this sense that Mead contended that “the existence as such of mind or consciousness, in some sense or other, must be admitted” (10). Mead was aware that the mind cannot be reduced solely to behaviors, but he argued that it is possible to explain it in behavioral terms without denying its existence.

Mead defined the mind in functional rather than idealist terms. That is, the mind is viewed in terms of what it does, the role it plays in the act, rather than as some transcendental, subjective phenomenon. The mind is a part, the key part, of the central nervous system, and Mead sought to extend the analysis of the act, especially the social act, to what transpires in the central nervous system: “What I am insisting upon is that the patterns which one finds in the central nervous system are patterns of action—not of contemplation” (1934/1962:26). Furthermore, what goes on in the central nervous system is not really separable from the act; it is an integral part of the act. Thus, Mead did not want to think of the mind in subjective terms but rather as something that is part of an objective process.

Pragmatism

Another important intellectual input into Mead’s thinking was pragmatism; indeed, Mead was one of the key figures in the development of pragmatic philosophy (others were John Dewey and Charles Peirce) (Halton, 2005; J. D. Lewis and Smith, 1980; LoConto and Arrington, 2007; Wiley, 2006). Mead (1938/1972) regarded pragmatism as a “natural American outgrowth.” Pragmatism reflected the triumph of science and the scientific method within American society and their extension into the study of the social world (J. Baldwin, 1986). Instead of being contemplative and otherworldly, as were previous philosophical systems, pragmatism adopted a focus on this world, on empirical reality. Pragmatists believe in the superiority of scientific data over philosophical dogma and all other types of knowledge. As John Baldwin summarized, “Science is superior to trial-and-error learning, introspection, a priori logic, religious dogma, idealism, speculative philosophy, and all other nonempirical sources of knowledge” (1986:16). Science is seen as the optimum means not only for obtaining knowledge but also for analyzing and solving social problems. Scientific theories, as well as ideas in general, are to be tested using the full array of scientific procedures. The ideas that survive are those that are likely to provide knowledge that is useful and that solves problems. Pragmatists reject the idea of absolute truths. Rather, following the scientific model, they regard all ideas as provisional and subject to change in light of future research.

Pragmatism also involves a series of ideas that relate more directly to Mead’s sociological theory (Charon, 2000). First, to pragmatists, truth and reality do not exist “out there” in the real world; they are “actively created as we act in and toward the world” (J. Hewitt, 1984:8; see also Shalin, 1986). Second, people remember the past and base their knowledge of the world on what has proved useful to them. They are likely to alter what no longer “works.” Third, people define the social and physical “objects” that they encounter in
the world according to their use for them. Finally, if we want to understand actors, we must base our understanding on what they actually do in the world. Given these viewpoints, we can understand John Baldwin’s contention that pragmatism is "rooted in a ‘rough and ready’ American ethic developed by the settlers who had faced the challenges of new frontiers and dealt with the practical problems of taming a new land" (1986:22). In sum, pragmatism is a “pragmatic” philosophy in several senses, including the fact that it adopts the scientists’ focus on the here and now as well as scientific methods; it is concerned with what people actually do, and it is interested in generating practical ideas that can help us cope with society’s problems.
Most of the important theorists discussed throughout this book achieved their greatest recognition in their lifetimes for their published work. George Herbert Mead, however, was at least as important, at least during his lifetime, for his teaching as for his writing (Huebner, 2014). His words had a powerful impact on many people who were to become important sociologists in the twentieth century. As one of his students said, “Conversation was his best medium; writing was a poor second” (T. V. Smith, 1931:369). Another of his students, the well-known sociologist Leonard Cottrell, described what Mead was like as a teacher:

For me, the course with Professor Mead was a unique and unforgettable experience…. Professor Mead was a large, amiable-looking man who wore a magnificent mustache and a Vandyke beard. He characteristically had a benign, rather shy smile matched with a twinkle in his eyes as if he were enjoying a secret joke he was playing on the audience…. As he lectured—always without notes—Professor Mead would manipulate the piece of chalk and watch it intently…. When he made a particularly subtle point in his lecture he would glance up and throw a shy, almost apologetic smile over our heads—never looking directly at anyone. His lecture flowed and we soon learned that questions or comments from the class were not welcome. Indeed, when someone was bold enough to raise a question there was a murmur of disapproval from the students. They objected to any interruption of the golden flow…. His expectations of students were modest. He never gave exams. The main task for each of us students was to write as learned a paper as one could. These Professor Mead read with great care, and what he thought of your paper was your grade in the course. One might suppose that students would read materials for the paper rather than attend his lectures but that was not the case. Students always came. They couldn’t get enough of Mead.

(Cottrell, 1980:49–50)

Mead had enormous difficulty writing and this troubled him a great deal. “I am vastly depressed by my inability to write what I want to” (cited in G. Cook, 1993:xiii). However, over the years, many of Mead’s ideas came to be published, especially in *Mind, Self and*
Born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, on February 27, 1863, Mead was trained mainly in philosophy and its application to social psychology. He received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College (where his father was a professor) in 1883, and after a few years as a secondary-school teacher, surveyor for railroad companies, and private tutor, Mead began graduate study at Harvard in 1887. After a few years of study at Harvard, as well as at the Universities of Leipzig and Berlin, Mead was offered an instructorship at the University of Michigan in 1891. It is interesting to note that Mead never received any graduate degrees. In 1894, at the invitation of John Dewey, he moved to the University of Chicago and remained there for the rest of his life.

As Mead made clear in the following excerpt from a letter, he was heavily influenced by Dewey: "Mr. Dewey is a man of not only great originality and profound thought but the most appreciative thinker I have ever met. I have gained more from him than from any one man I ever met" (cited in G. Cook, 1993:32). This was especially true of Mead's early work at Chicago and he even followed Dewey into educational theory (Dewey left Chicago in 1904). However, Mead's thinking quickly diverged from Dewey's and led him in the direction of his famous social psychological theories of mind, self, and society. He began teaching a course on social psychology in 1900. In 1916–1917 it was transformed into an advanced course (the stenographic student notes from the 1928 course became the basis of *Mind, Self and Society*) that followed a course in elementary social psychology that was taught after 1919 by Ellsworth Faris of the sociology department. It was through this course that Mead had such a powerful influence on students in sociology (as well as psychology and education).

In addition to his scholarly pursuits, Mead became involved in social reform. He believed that science could be used to deal with social problems. For example, he was heavily involved as a fund raiser and policy maker at the University of Chicago Settlement House, which had been inspired by Jane Addams's Hull House. Perhaps most importantly, he played a key role in social research conducted by the settlement house.

Although eligible for retirement in 1928, he continued to teach at the invitation of the university and in the summer of 1930 became chair of the philosophy department. Unfortunately, he became embroiled in a bitter conflict between the department and the president of the university. This led in early 1931 to a letter of resignation from Mead, written from his hospital bed. He was released from the hospital in late April, but died from heart failure the following day. John Dewey said he was "the most original mind in philosophy in the America of the last generations" (G. Cook, 1993:194).

J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith (1980) differentiate between two strands of pragmatism—**nominalist pragmatism** (associated with John Dewey and William James) and **philosophical realism** (associated with Mead). The nominalist position is that although societal phenomena exist, they do not exist independently of people and do not have a determining effect upon individual consciousness and behavior (in contrast to Emile Durkheim's social facts and the reified worlds of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel). More positively, this view "conceives of the individuals themselves as existentially free agents who accept, reject, modify, or otherwise 'define' the community's norms, roles, beliefs, and so forth, according to their own personal interests and plans of the moment" (J. D. Lewis and Smith, 1980:24). In contrast, to social realists the emphasis is on society and how it constitutes and controls individual mental processes. Rather than being free agents, actors and their cognitions and behaviors are controlled by the larger community.

Given this distinction, Lewis and Smith concluded that Mead's work fits better into the realist camp. There is much of merit in this position, and it will inform some of the ensuing discussion (especially on the priority Mead accords to the social). However, to classify Mead as a realist would be to include him in the same category as Durkheim, and this is unacceptable because there are clearly important differences between their theories. In fact, Mead's theory cannot be forced into either of these categories. There are elements of both nominalism and realism in Mead's thinking. To put it more concretely, in most of Mead's work, social processes and consciousness mutually inform one another and cannot be clearly distinguished. In other words,
there is a dialectic between realism and nominalism in Mead’s work.

**Dialectics**

This brings us to another important source of Mead’s thinking—the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, especially his dialectical approach. We have already encountered the dialectic, especially in Chapter 6 on Marx, and many of the ideas expressed there apply to Mead’s thinking. We return to this issue later in the chapter because, as we will see, dialectical thinking makes it almost impossible to separate Mead’s many theoretical ideas; they are dialectically related to one another. However, adopting the strategy followed by Mead himself, we differentiate among various concepts for the sake of clarity of discussion. Bear in mind (and occasionally the reader will be reminded) through each of the specific discussions that there is a dialectical interrelationship among the various concepts (see also Côté, 2015, especially chap. 2).
The Priority of the Social

In his review of Mead's best-known work, *Mind, Self and Society*, Ellsworth Faris argued that “not mind and then society; but society first and then minds arising with that society … would probably have been [Mead’s] preference” (cited in D. Miller, 1982a:2). Faris’s inversion of the title of this book reflects the widely acknowledged fact, recognized by Mead himself, that society, or more broadly the social, is accorded priority in Mead’s analysis.

In Mead’s view, traditional social psychology began with the psychology of the individual in an effort to explain social experience; in contrast, Mead always gave priority to the social world in understanding social experience. Mead explained his focus in this way:

We are not, in social psychology, building up the behavior of the social group in terms of the behavior of separate individuals composing it; rather, we are starting out with a given social whole of complex group activity, into which we analyze (as elements) the behavior of each of the separate individuals composing it…. We attempt, that is, to explain the conduct of the social group, rather than to account for the organized conduct of the social group in terms of the conduct of the separate individuals belonging to it. For social psychology, the whole (society) is prior to the part (the individual), not the part to the whole; and the part is explained in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of the part or parts.

(Mead, 1934/1962:7; italics added)

To Mead, the social whole precedes the individual mind both logically and temporally. A thinking, self-conscious individual is, as we will see later, logically impossible in Mead’s theory without a prior social group. The social group comes first, and it leads to the development of self-conscious mental states.
The Act

Mead considered the act to be the most “primitive unit” in his theory (1982:27). In analyzing the act, Mead came closest to the behaviorist’s approach and focused on stimulus and response. However, even here the stimulus does not elicit an automatic, unthinking response from the human actor. As Mead said, “We conceive of the stimulus as an occasion or opportunity for the act, not as a compulsion or a mandate” (1982:28).

Stages

Mead (1938/1972) identified four basic and interrelated stages in the act (Schmitt and Schmitt, 1996). Both lower animals and humans act, and Mead was interested in the similarities, and especially the differences, between the two.

The first stage is that of the impulse, which involves an “immediate sensuous stimulation” and the actor’s reaction to the stimulation, the need to do something about it. Hunger is a good example of an impulse. The actor (both nonhuman and human) may respond immediately and unthinkingly to the impulse, but more likely the human actor will think about the appropriate response (e.g., eat now or later). The second stage of the act is perception, in which the actor searches for and reacts to stimuli that relate to the impulse, in this case hunger as well as the various means available to satisfy it. People have the capacity to sense or perceive stimuli through hearing, smell, taste, and so on. Perception involves incoming stimuli, as well as the mental images they create. People do not simply respond immediately to external stimuli but rather think about and assess them through mental imagery. Mead refused to separate people from the objects that they perceive. It is the act of perceiving an object that makes it an object to a person; perception and object cannot be separated from (are dialectically related to) one another.

The third stage is manipulation. Once the impulse has manifested itself and the object has been perceived, the next step is manipulating the object or, more generally, taking action with regard to it. In addition to their mental advantages, people have another advantage over lower animals. People have hands (with opposable thumbs) that allow them to manipulate objects far more subtly than can lower animals. The manipulation phase constitutes, for Mead, an important temporary pause in the process so that a response is not manifested immediately. A hungry human being sees a mushroom, but before eating it, he or she is likely to pick it up first, examine it, and perhaps check in a guidebook to see whether that particular variety is edible. The pause afforded by handling the object allows humans to contemplate various responses.

On the basis of these deliberations, the actor may decide to eat the mushroom (or not), and this constitutes the last phase of the act, consummation, or more generally the taking of action that satisfies the original impulse. Both humans and lower animals may consume the mushroom, but the human is less likely to eat a bad mushroom because of his or her ability to manipulate the mushroom and to think (and read) about the implications of eating it.

For ease of discussion, the four stages of the act have been separated from one another in sequential order, but
Mead saw a dialectical relationship among the four stages. John Baldwin expressed this idea in the following way: “Although the four parts of the act sometimes appear to be linked in linear order, they actually interpenetrate to form one organic process: Facets of each part are present at all times from the beginning of the act to the end, such that each part affects the other” (1986:55–56). Thus, the later stages of the act may lead to the emergence of earlier stages. For example, manipulating food may lead the individual to the impulse of hunger and the perception that the individual is hungry and that food is available to satisfy the need.

**Gestures**

Whereas the act involves only one person, the *social act* involves two or more persons. The *gesture*, in Mead’s view, is the basic mechanism in the social act and in the social process more generally. As he defined them, “gestures are movements of the first organism which act as specific stimuli calling forth the (socially) appropriate responses of the second organism” (Mead, 1934/1962:14; see also Mead, 1959:187). Both lower animals and humans are capable of gestures in the sense that the action of one individual mindlessly and automatically elicits a reaction by another individual. The following is Mead’s famous example of a dogfight in terms of gestures:

The act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response…. The very fact that the dog is ready to attack another becomes a stimulus to the other dog to change his own position or his own attitude. He has no sooner done this than the change of attitude in the second dog in turn causes the first dog to change his attitude.

(Mead, 1934/1962:42–43)

Mead labeled what is taking place in this situation a “conversation of gestures.” One dog’s gesture automatically elicits a gesture from the second; there are no thought processes taking place on the part of the dogs.

Humans sometimes engage in mindless conversations of gestures. Mead gave as examples many of the actions and reactions that take place in boxing and fencing matches, when one combatant adjusts “instinctively” to the actions of the second. Mead labeled such unconscious actions “nonsignificant” gestures; what distinguishes humans is their ability to employ “significant” gestures, or those that require thought on the part of the actor before a reaction.

The vocal gesture is particularly important in the development of significant gestures. However, not all vocal gestures are significant. The bark of one dog to another is not significant; even some human vocal gestures (e.g., a mindless grunt) may not be significant. However, it is the development of vocal gestures, especially in the form of language, that is the most important factor in making possible the distinctive development of human life: “The specialization of the human animal within this field of the gesture has been responsible, ultimately, for the origin and growth of present human society and knowledge, with all the control over nature and over the human environment which science makes possible” (Mead, 1934/1962:14).
This development is related to a distinctive characteristic of the vocal gesture. When we make a physical gesture, such as a facial grimace, we cannot see what we are doing (unless we happen to be looking in the mirror). On the other hand, when we utter a vocal gesture, we hear ourselves just as others do. One result is that the vocal gesture can affect the speaker in much the same way that it affects the listeners. Another is that we are far better able to stop ourselves in vocal gestures than we are able to do in physical gestures. In other words, we have far better control over vocal gestures than physical ones. This ability to control oneself and one’s reactions is critical, as we will see, to the other distinctive capabilities of humans. More generally, “it has been the vocal gesture that has preeminently provided the medium of social organization in human society” (Mead, 1959:188).

**Significant Symbols**

A significant symbol is a kind of gesture, one which only humans can make. Gestures become significant symbols when they arouse in the individual who is making them the same kind of response (it need not be identical) as he or she is supposed to elicit from those to whom the gestures are addressed. Only when we have significant symbols can we truly have communication; communication in the full sense of the term is not possible among ants, bees, and so on. Physical gestures can be significant symbols, but as we have seen, they are not ideally suited to be significant symbols because people cannot easily see or hear their own physical gestures. Thus, it is vocal utterances that are most likely to become significant symbols, although not all vocalizations are such symbols. The set of vocal gestures most likely to become significant symbols is language: “a symbol which answers to a meaning in that experience of the first individual and which also calls out the meaning in the second individual. Where the gesture reaches that situation it has become what we call ‘language.’ It is now a significant symbol and it signifies a certain meaning” (Mead, 1934/1962:46). In a conversation of gestures, only the gestures themselves are communicated. However, with language the gestures and their meanings are communicated.

One of the things that language, or significant symbols more generally, does is call out the same response in the individual who is speaking as it does in others. The word dog or cat elicits the same mental image in the person uttering the word as it does in those to whom it is addressed. Another effect of language is that it stimulates the person speaking as it does others. The person yelling “fire” in a crowded theater is at least as motivated to leave the theater as are those to whom the shout is addressed. Thus, significant symbols allow people to be the stimulators of their own actions.

Adopting his pragmatist orientation, Mead also looked at the “functions” of gestures in general and of significant symbols in particular. The function of the gesture “is to make adjustment possible among the individuals implicated in any given social act with reference to the object or objects with which that act is concerned” (Mead, 1934/1962:46). Thus, an involuntary facial grimace may be made in order to prevent a child from going too close to the edge of a precipice and thereby prevent him or her from being in a potentially dangerous situation. Although the nonsignificant gesture works, the “significant symbol affords far greater facilities for such adjustment and readjustment than does the nonsignificant gesture, because it calls out in the individual making it the same attitude toward it … and enables him to adjust his subsequent
behavior to theirs in the light of that attitude” (Mead, 1934/1962:46). From a pragmatic point of view, a significant symbol works better in the social world than does a nonsignificant gesture. In other words, in communicating our displeasure to others, an angry verbal rebuke works far better than contorted body language. The individual who is manifesting displeasure is not usually conscious of body language and therefore is unlikely to be able to consciously adjust later actions in light of how the other person reacts to the body language. On the other hand, a speaker is conscious of uttering an angry rebuke and reacts to it in much the same way (and at about the same time) as the person to whom it is aimed reacts. Thus, the speaker can think about how the other person might react and can prepare his or her reaction to that reaction.

Of crucial importance in Mead’s theory is another function of significant symbols—that they make the mind, mental processes, and so on, possible. It is only through significant symbols, especially language, that human thinking is possible (lower animals cannot think, in Mead’s terms). Mead defined thinking as “simply an internalized or implicit conversation of the individual with himself by means of such gestures” (1934/1962:47). Even more strongly, Mead argued, “Thinking is the same as talking to other people” (1982:155). In other words, thinking involves talking to oneself. Thus, we can see clearly here how Mead defined thinking in behaviorist terms. Conversations involve behavior (talking), and that behavior also occurs within the individual; when it does, thinking is taking place. This is not a mentalistic definition of thinking; it is decidedly behavioristic.

Significant symbols also make possible symbolic interaction. That is, people can interact with one another not just through gestures but also through significant symbols. This ability, of course, makes a world of difference and makes possible much more complex interaction patterns and forms of social organization than would be possible through gestures alone.

The significant symbol obviously plays a central role in Mead’s thinking. In fact, David Miller (1982a:10–11) accorded the significant symbol the central role in Mead’s theory.
Mental Processes and the Mind

Mead used a number of similar-sounding concepts when discussing mental processes, and it is important to sort out the most important of them. Before we do that, the point should be made that Mead was always inclined to think in terms of processes rather than structures or contents. In fact, Mead is often labeled a “process philosopher” (Cronk, 1987; D. Miller, 1982a).

Intelligence

One term that sounds as though it belongs under the heading of “mental processes” but actually does not, in Mead’s thinking, is intelligence. Mead defined intelligence most broadly as the mutual adjustment of the acts of organisms. By this definition, lower animals clearly have “intelligence,” because in a conversation of gestures they adapt to one another. Similarly, humans can adapt to one another through the use of nonsignificant symbols (e.g., involuntary grimaces). However, what distinguishes humans is that they can also exhibit intelligence, or mutual adaptation, through the use of significant symbols. Thus, a bloodhound has intelligence, but the intelligence of the detective is distinguished from that of the bloodhound by the capacity to use significant symbols.

Mead argued that animals have “unreasoning intelligence.” In contrast, humans have “reason,” which Mead defined in a characteristically behavioristic manner: “When you are reasoning you are indicating to yourself the characters that call out certain responses—and that is all you are doing” (1934/1962:93). In other words, individuals are carrying on conversations with themselves.

What is crucial to the reflective intelligence of humans is their ability to inhibit action temporarily, to delay their reactions to a stimulus (Mead, 1959:84). In the case of lower animals, a stimulus leads immediately and inevitably to a reaction; lower animals lack the capacity to inhibit their reactions temporarily. As Mead put it, “Delayed reaction is necessary to intelligent conduct. The organization, implicit testing, and final selection … would be impossible if his overt responses or reactions could not in such situations be delayed” (1934/1962:99). There are three components here. First, humans, because of their ability to delay reactions, are able to organize in their own minds the array of possible responses to a situation. Humans possess in their minds the alternative ways of completing a social act in which they are involved. Second, people are able to test out mentally, again through an internal conversation with themselves, the various courses of action. In contrast, lower animals lack this capacity and therefore must try out reactions in the real world in trial-and-error fashion. The ability to try out responses mentally, as we saw in the case of the poison mushroom, is much more effective than the trial-and-error method. There is no social cost involved in mentally trying out a poorly adapted response. However, when a lower animal actually uses such a response in the real world (e.g., when a dog approaches a poisonous snake), the results can be costly, even disastrous. Finally, humans are able to pick out one stimulus among a set of stimuli rather than simply reacting to the first or strongest stimulus. In addition, humans can select among a range of alternative actions, whereas lower animals simply act. As Mead said:
It is the entrance of the alternative possibilities of future response into the determination of present conduct in any given environmental situation, and their operation, through the mechanism of the central nervous system, as part of the factors or conditions determining present behavior, which decisively contrasts intelligent conduct or behavior with reflex, instinctive, and habitual conduct or behavior—delayed reaction with immediate reaction. (Mead, 1934/1962:98; italics added)

The ability to choose among a range of actions means that the choices of humans are likely to be better adapted to the situation than are the immediate and mindless reactions of lower animals. As Mead contended, “Intelligence is largely a matter of selectivity” (1934/1962:99).

**Consciousness**

Mead also discussed consciousness, which he saw as having two distinguishable meanings (1938/1972:75). The first is that to which the actor alone has access, that which is entirely subjective. Mead was less interested in this sense of consciousness than the second, which basically involves reflective intelligence. Thus, Mead was less interested in the way in which we experience immediate pain or pleasure than he is in the way in which we think about the social world.

Consciousness is to be explained or accounted for within the social process. That is, in contrast to most analysts, Mead believed that consciousness is *not* lodged in the brain: “Consciousness is functional not substantive; and in either of the main senses of the term it must be located in the objective world rather than in the brain—it belongs to, or is a characteristic of, the environment in which we find ourselves. What is located, what does take place, in the brain, however, is the physiological process whereby we lose and regain consciousness” (1934/1962:112).

In a similar manner, Mead (1934/1962:332) refused to position mental images in the brain, but saw them as social phenomena: “What we term ‘mental images’… can exist in their relation to the organism without being lodged in a substantial consciousness. The mental image is a memory image. Such images which, as symbols, play so large a part in thinking, belong to the environment.”

Meaning is yet another related concept that Mead addressed behavioristically. Characteristically, Mead rejected the idea that meaning lies in consciousness: “Awareness or consciousness is not necessary to the presence of meaning in the process of social experience” (1934/1962:77). Similarly, Mead rejected the idea that meaning is a “psychical” phenomenon or an “idea.” Rather, meaning lies squarely within the social act: “Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture. If that gesture does so indicate to another organism the subsequent (or resultant) behavior of the given organism, then it has meaning” (Mead, 1934/1962:75–76). It is the adjustive response of the second organism that gives meaning to the gesture of the first organism. The meaning of a gesture can be seen as the “ability to predict the behavior that is likely to occur next” (J. Baldwin, 1986:72).
Meaning is found in behavior, and meaning becomes conscious when it is associated with symbols. However, although meaning can become conscious among humans, it is present in the social act prior to the emergence of consciousness and the awareness of meaning. Thus, in these terms, lower animals (and humans) can engage in meaningful behavior even though they are not aware of the meaning.

**Mind**

Like consciousness, the *mind*, which is defined by Mead as a process and not a thing, as an inner conversation with one’s self, is not found within the individual; it is not intracranial but is a social phenomenon. It arises and develops within the social process and is an integral part of that process. The social process precedes the mind; it is not, as many believe, a product of the mind. Thus, the mind, too, is defined functionally rather than substantively. Given these similarities to ideas like consciousness, is there anything distinctive about the mind? We have already seen that humans have the peculiar capacity to call out in themselves the response they are seeking to elicit from others. A distinctive characteristic of the mind is the ability of the individual “to call out in himself not simply a single response of the other but the response, so to speak, of the community as a whole. That is what gives to an individual what we term ‘mind.’ To do anything now means a certain organized response; and if one has in himself that response, he has what we term ‘mind’” (Mead, 1934/1962:267). Thus, the mind can be distinguished from other like-sounding concepts in Mead’s work by its ability to respond to the overall community and put forth an organized response.

Mead also looked at the mind in another, pragmatic way. That is, the mind involves thought processes oriented toward problem solving. The real world is rife with problems, and it is the function of the mind to try to solve those problems and permit people to operate more effectively in the world.
Self

Much of Mead’s thinking in general, and especially on the mind, involves his ideas on the critically important concept of the self, basically the ability to take oneself as an object; the self is the peculiar ability to be both subject and object. As is true of all Mead’s major concepts, the self presupposes a social process: communication among humans. Lower animals do not have selves, nor do human infants at birth. The self arises with development and through social activity and social relationships. To Mead, it is impossible to imagine a self arising in the absence of social experiences. However, after a self has developed, it is possible for it to continue to exist without social contact. Thus, Robinson Crusoe developed a self while he was in civilization, and he continued to have it when he was living alone on what he thought for a while was a deserted island. In other words, he continued to have the ability to take himself as an object. After a self is developed, people usually, but not always, manifest it. For example, the self is not involved in habitual actions or in immediate physiological experiences of pleasure or pain.

The self is dialectically related to the mind (we say more shortly about the dialectic in Mead’s thought). That is, on the one hand, Mead argued that the body is not a self and becomes a self only when a mind has developed. On the other hand, the self, and its reflexiveness, is essential to the development of the mind. Of course, it is impossible to separate mind and self because the self is a mental process. However, even though we may think of it as a mental process, the self is a social process. In his discussion of the self, as we have seen in regard to all other mental phenomena, Mead resisted the idea of lodging it in consciousness and instead embedded it in social experience and social processes. In this way, Mead sought to give a behavioristic sense of the self: “But it is where one does respond to that which he addresses to another and where that response of his own becomes a part of his conduct, where he not only hears himself but responds to himself, talks and replies to himself as truly as the other person replies to him, that we have behavior in which the individuals become objects to themselves” (1934/1962:139; italics added). The self, then, is simply another aspect of the overall social process of which the individual is a part.

The general mechanism for the development of the self is reflexivity, or the ability to put ourselves unconsciously into others’ places and to act as they act. As a result, people are able to examine themselves as others would examine them. As Mead said:

It is by means of reflexiveness—the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself—that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it.

(Mead, 1934/1962:134)

The self also allows people to take part in their conversations with others. That is, one is aware of what one is
saying and as a result is able to monitor what is being said and to determine what is going to be said next.

To have selves, individuals must be able to get “outside themselves” so that they can evaluate themselves, so they can become objects to themselves. To do this, people basically put themselves in the same experiential field as they put everyone else (Schwalbe, 2005). Everyone is an important part of that experiential situation, and people must take themselves into account if they are to be able to act rationally in a given situation. Having done this, they seek to examine themselves impersonally, objectively, and without emotion.

However, people cannot experience themselves directly. They can do so only indirectly by putting themselves in the position of others and viewing themselves from that standpoint. The standpoint from which one views one’s self can be that of a particular individual or that of the social group as a whole. As Mead put it, most generally, “It is only by taking the roles of others that we have been able to come back to ourselves” (1959:184–185).

**Child Development**

Mead was very interested in the genesis of the self. He saw the conversation of gestures as the background for the self, but it does not involve a self, because in such a conversation the people are not taking themselves as objects. Mead traced the genesis of the self through two stages in childhood development.

**Play Stage**

The first stage is the *play stage*; it is during this stage that children learn to take the attitude of particular others to themselves. Although lower animals also play, only human beings “play at being someone else” (Aboulafia, 1986:9). Mead gave the example of children imagining invisible companions or playing games in which they pretend to be a mother, teacher, or police officer. As a result of such play, the child learns to become both subject and object and begins to become able to build a self. However, it is a limited self because the child can take only the role of distinct and separate others. Children may play at being “mommy” and “daddy” and in the process develop the ability to evaluate themselves as their parents, and other specific individuals, do. However, they lack a more general and organized sense of themselves.

**Game Stage**

It is the next stage, the *game stage*, that is required if the person is to develop a self in the full sense of the term. Whereas in the play stage the child takes the role of discrete others, in the game stage the child must take the role of everyone else involved in the game. Furthermore, these different roles must have a definite relationship to one another. In illustrating the game stage, Mead gave his famous example of a baseball (or, as he called it, “ball nine”) game:

But in a game where a number of individuals are involved, then the child taking one role must be ready to take the role of everyone else. If he gets in a ball nine he must have the responses of each position involved in his own position. He must know what everyone else is going to do in order to carry out his own play. He has to take all of these roles. They do not all have to be present in consciousness at the
same time, but at some moments he has to have three or four individuals present in his own attitude, such as the one who is going to throw the ball, the one who is going to catch it, and so on. These responses must be, in some degree, present in his own make-up. In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of the other.

(Mead, 1934/1962:151)

In the play stage, children are not organized wholes because they play at a series of discrete roles. As a result, in Mead’s view, they lack definite personalities. However, in the game stage, such organization begins and a definite personality starts to emerge. Children begin to become able to function in organized groups and, most important, to determine what they will do within a specific group.

**Generalized Other**

The game stage yields one of Mead’s (1959:87) best-known concepts, the *generalized other*. The generalized other is the attitude of the entire community or, in the example of the baseball game, the attitude of the entire team. The ability to take the role of the generalized other is essential to the self: “Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group is engaged, does he develop a complete self” (Mead, 1934/1962:155). It is also crucial that people be able to evaluate themselves from the point of view of the generalized other and not merely from the viewpoint of discrete others. Taking the role of the generalized other, rather than that of discrete others, allows for the possibility of abstract thinking and objectivity (Mead, 1959:190). Here is the way Mead described the full development of the self:

> So the self reaches its full development by organizing these individual attitudes of others into the organized social or group attitudes, and by thus becoming an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or group behavior in which it and others are involved—a pattern which enters as a whole into the individual’s experience in terms of these organized group attitudes which, through the mechanism of the central nervous system, he takes toward himself, just as he takes the individual attitudes of others.

(Mead, 1934/1962:158)

In other words, to have a self, one must be a member of a community and be directed by the attitudes common to the community. Whereas play requires only pieces of selves, the game requires a coherent self.

Not only is taking the role of the generalized other essential to the self, but it is also crucial for the development of organized group activities. A group requires that individuals direct their activities in accord with the attitudes of the generalized other. The generalized other also represents Mead’s familiar propensity to give priority to the social, because it is through the generalized other that the group influences the behavior
Mead also looked at the self from a pragmatic point of view. At the individual level, the self allows the individual to be a more efficient member of the larger society. Because of the self, people are more likely to do what is expected of them in a given situation. Because people often try to live up to group expectations, they are more likely to avoid the inefficiencies that come from failing to do what the group expects. Furthermore, the self allows for greater coordination in society as a whole. Because individuals can be counted on to do what is expected of them, the group can operate more effectively.

The preceding, as well as the overall discussion of the self, might lead us to believe that Mead’s actors are little more than conformists and that there is little individuality because everyone is busy conforming to the expectations of the generalized other. But Mead was clear that each self is different from all others. Selves share a common structure, but each self receives unique biographical articulation. In addition, it is clear that there is not simply one grand generalized other but that there are many generalized others in society because there are many groups in society. People, therefore, have multiple generalized others and, as a result, multiple selves. Each person’s unique set of selves makes him or her different from everyone else. Furthermore, people need not accept the community as it is; they can reform things and seek to make them better. We are able to change the community because of our capacity to think. But Mead was forced to put this issue of individual creativity in familiar, behavioristic terms: “The only way in which we can react against the disapproval of the entire community is by setting up a higher sort of community which in a certain sense out-votes the one we find … he may stand out by himself over against it. But to do that he has to comprehend the voices of the past and of the future. That is the only way the self can get a voice which is more than the voice of the community” (1934/1962:167–168). In other words, to stand up to the generalized other, the individual must construct a still larger generalized other, composed not only from the present but also from the past and the future, and then respond to it.

Mead identified two aspects, or phases, of the self, which he labeled the “I” and the “me” (for a critique of this distinction, see Athens, 1995). As Mead put it, “The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases” (1934/1962:178). It is important to bear in mind that the “I” and “me” are processes within the larger process of the self; they are not “things.”

“I” and “Me”

The “I” is the immediate response of an individual to others. It is the incalculable, unpredictable, and creative aspect of the self. People do not know in advance what the action of the “I” will be: “But what that response will be he does not know and nobody else knows. Perhaps he will make a brilliant play or an error. The response to that situation as it appears in his immediate experience is uncertain” (Mead, 1934/1962:175). We are never totally aware of the “I,” and through it we surprise ourselves with our actions. We know the “I” only after the act has been carried out. Thus, we know the “I” only in our memories. Mead laid great stress on the “I” for four reasons. First, it is a key source of novelty in the social process. Second, Mead believed that it is in the “I” that our most important values are located. Third, the “I” constitutes something that we all seek—the realization of the self. It is the “I” that permits us to develop a “definite personality.” Finally, Mead saw an
The evolutionary process in history in which people in primitive societies are dominated more by “me,” whereas in modern societies there is a greater component of “I.”

The “I” gives Mead’s theoretical system some much-needed dynamism and creativity. Without it, Mead’s actors would be totally dominated by external and internal controls. With it, Mead was able to deal with the changes brought about not only by the great figures in history (e.g., Einstein) but also by individuals on a day-to-day basis. It is the “I” that makes these changes possible. Because every personality is a mix of “I” and “me,” the great historical figures are seen as having a larger proportion of “I” than most others have. But in day-to-day situations, anyone’s “I” may assert itself and lead to change in the social situation. Uniqueness is also brought into Mead’s system through the biographical articulation of each individual’s “I” and “me.” That is, the specific exigencies of each person’s life give him or her a unique mix of “I” and “me.”

The “I” reacts against the “me,” which is the “organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (Mead, 1934/1962:175). In other words, the “me” is the adoption of the generalized other. In contrast to the “I,” people are conscious of the “me”; the “me” involves conscious responsibility. As Mead said, “The ‘me’ is a conventional, habitual individual” (1934/1962:197). Conformists are dominated by “me,” although everyone—whatever his or her degree of conformity—has, and must have, substantial “me.” It is through the “me” that society dominates the individual. Indeed, Mead defined the idea of social control as the dominance of the expression of the “me” over the expression of the “I.” Later in Mind, Self and Society, Mead elaborated on his ideas on social control:

Social control, as operating in terms of self-criticism, exerts itself so intimately and extensively over individual behavior or conduct, serving to integrate the individual and his actions with reference to the organized social process of experience and behavior in which he is implicated…. Social control over individual behavior or conduct operates by virtue of the social origin and basis of such [self-]criticism. That is to say, self-criticism is essentially social criticism, and behavior controlled socially. Hence social control, so far from tending to crush out the human individual or to obliterate his self-conscious individuality, is, on the contrary, actually constitutive of and inextricably associated with that individuality.

(Mead, 1934/1962:255)

Mead also looked at the “I” and “me” in pragmatic terms. The “me” allows the individual to live comfortably in the social world, whereas the “I” makes the change of society possible. Society gets enough conformity to allow it to function, and it gets a steady infusion of new developments to prevent it from stagnating. The “I” and the “me” are thus part of the whole social process and allow both individuals and society to function more effectively.
Even though Mead has been associated with social psychology, from the very beginning of his career he was also concerned with the concept of society. The self, he insisted, could not be understood outside of its social context. In particular, he was interested in the relationship between society, self, and social change. This said, in spite of its centrality in his theoretical system, Mead had relatively little to say explicitly about society (Athens, 2005). Even John Baldwin, who saw a much more societal (macro) component in Mead’s thinking, was forced to admit: “The macro components of Mead’s theoretical system are not as well developed as the micro” (1986:123). A full understanding of Mead’s theory of society requires, then, what Jean-François Côté (2015) called a “critical reconstruction” of Mead’s theory of society.

At the most general level, Mead used the term *society* to mean the ongoing social process that precedes both the mind and the self. He drew on both evolutionary and Hegelian perspectives to give us “a picture of a society as a living process of formation and transformation” (Côté, 2015:14). Though this definition bears some similarities to Spencer’s organismic conception of society (see Chapter 5) and Durkheim’s definition of society as a social fact or a thing in itself (see Chapter 7), it should be clear that Mead offered a dialectical theory of self and society. Self-consciousness and social consciousness, though distinct phenomena, develop in relationship to one another.

On the one side of this dialectic, society guides the actions of individuals. Here society represents the organized set of responses that are taken over by the individual in the form of the “me.” In this sense, individuals carry society around with them, giving them the ability, through self-criticism, to control themselves. On the other side, society depends upon the self-reflective consciousness of its citizens. The consciousness of a society and the nature of its institutions, develops in relationship to the consciousness of the persons who compose that society: “self-consciousness for Mead is not only, and not even primarily, an individual issue, but rather a societal one; it is only at a certain historical point in its self-development that a society requires the universality of self-conscious individuals for its development, that is to say, reaching every single individual” (Côté, 2015:ix). This is also where Mead’s interest in social reform meets his theory of self and society. According to Mead, the emergence of the political institution of “mass democracy” signals a new level of social evolution in which social change depends on the exercise of reflective individual self-consciousness at a collective level (Côté, 2015).

Mead also used the concept of *emergence* in his work. Emergence describes processes in which unique wholes develop out of the interaction between their parts. For example, even though the phenomenon of society emerges out of the interaction between individuals, society is not merely the sum of those individual interactions. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. Mead said: “Emergence involves a reorganization, but the reorganization brings in something that was not there before. The first time oxygen and hydrogen come together, water appears. Now water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, but water was not there before in the separate elements” (Mead, 1934/1962:198). Typically, when Mead used the concept of emergence, it was to describe how consciousness emerges out of the social, but as we have seen from the previous discussion Mead also allowed for the social to emerge from the level of the interaction between
Mead also had a number of things to say about social institutions. For Mead, institutions (and the generalized other) are the “mediating points between self and society” (Côté, 2015:22). Mead broadly defined an institution as the “common response in the community” or “the life habits of the community” (1934/1962:261, 264; see also Mead, 1936:376). More specifically, he said that “the whole community acts toward the individual under certain circumstances in an identical way … there is an identical response on the part of the whole community under these conditions. We call that the formation of the institution” (Mead, 1934/1962:167). We carry this organized set of attitudes around with us, and it serves to control our actions, largely through the “me.”

Education is the process by which the common habits of the community (the institution) are “internalized” in the actor. This is an essential process because, in Mead’s view, people neither have selves nor are genuine members of the community until they can respond to themselves as the larger community does. To do so, people must have internalized the common attitudes of the community.

But again Mead was careful to point out that institutions need not destroy individuality or stifle creativity. Mead recognized that there are “oppressive, stereotyped, and ultra-conservative social institutions—like the church—which by their more or less rigid and inflexible unprogressiveness crush or blot out individuality” (1934/1962:262). However, he was quick to add: “There is no necessary or inevitable reason why social institutions should be oppressive or rigidly conservative, or why they should not rather be, as many are, flexible and progressive, fostering individuality rather than discouraging it” (Mead, 1934/1962:262). To Mead, institutions should define what people ought to do only in a very broad and general sense and should allow plenty of room for individuality and creativity. Mead here demonstrated a very modern conception of social institutions as both constraining individuals and enabling them to be creative individuals (see Giddens, 1984). Mead was distinct from the other classical theorists in emphasizing the enabling character of society—arguably disregarding society’s constraining power (Athens, 2002).
Criticisms and Contemporary Applications

Mead’s theory is not as broad as those of most of the other theorists examined in this book. Nevertheless, it continues to be influential in contemporary symbolic interactionism, social psychology, and sociology more generally. Work continues to emerge in sociology (as well as in philosophy), building upon Mead’s theories (e.g., R. Collins, 1989b). Mead’s work still attracts theorists both in the United States and in the rest of the world (e.g., Habermas, 1984). This is the case in spite of a number of notable weaknesses in his theory. The greatest weakness, one that has been mentioned several times in this chapter, is that he has little to offer to our understanding of the macrosocietal level or issues of power and inequality (Shalin, 2011). Other weaknesses include some vague and fuzzy concepts; an inconsistent definition of concepts (especially intelligence); and his lack of concern, in spite of his focus on the micro level, for emotional and unconscious aspects of human conduct.

Criticisms aside, Mead’s ideas have been extended to address numerous specific problems of contemporary interest. For example, in a recent essay Colin Jerolmack and Iddo Tavory (2014) used Mead’s ideas to discuss the relationship between humans and nonhumans. Earlier in this chapter we emphasized that for Mead the self develops when it learns to take the perspective of other people. What is often overlooked is that Mead also, albeit briefly, discussed how taking the perspective of nonhumans impacts the development of self and the organization of society. Human beings are always in interaction with objects and animals that resist their actions and self-definitions. Jerolmack and Tavory give the example of a person taking a dog for a walk. While the dog walker tries to maintain the self-image of a person who is in control, the dog might jump on strangers or bite. In these situations, the dog walker is forced to accommodate these behaviors. For the dog walker, this results in a new definition of self or a new way of going for walks. The point is that all human self-conception and action is shaped by nonhuman objects that resist our attempts to define situations in any way that we would like. Here, Jerolmack and Tavory join contemporary actor network theorists (Latour, 2007) by arguing that society is not an exclusively human domain. Rather it emerges as humans reflect upon the ways in which nonhuman objects push back against humans. In Meadian terms, society develops not only as humans learn to take the role of other persons but also as they learn to take the role of nonhuman objects and entities.

Extending this point, Bradley Brewster and Anthony Puddephatt (2016) used Mead’s ideas to advance the field of environmental sociology. They portray him as a “socio-environmental” thinker. Like Jerolmack and Tavory, they argued that Mead’s theory allows us to think about the way in which our interactions with nonhuman objects and entities shape our selves and communities. In this case, the nonhuman object is the natural environment. According to Brewster and Puddephatt (2016:152), Mead defined the social as the mutual interdependency between entities. By this account, nature, in itself, can have a social character, and the relationship between humans and nature can also have a social character. Humans and their environments evolve together, “mutually” shaping one another. One of the failings of traditional sociological theory is that it has not sufficiently recognized the ways that humans and the natural world mutually shape one another. Using Mead’s ideas, Brewster and Puddephatt (2016:154) suggest that thinking about our relations with nature “is one way of” both expanding our understanding of the generalized other and “broadening our selves and our
ethical conduct.” We should, they suggest, include “ever more aspects of nonhuman nature into our notions of human community” (154). Indeed, thinking about the ways in which nature shapes human community has become all but unavoidable in an age of “melting ice-caps, ozone holes, mad cows, acid rain, peak oil, extinction, pollution, and climatic changes” (Brewster and Puddephatt, 2016:157).
Summary

George Herbert Mead developed his sociological theory out of the confluence of a number of intellectual inputs, the most important of which was behaviorism. Basically, Mead accepted the behavioristic approach and its focus on conduct but sought to extend it to a concern for mental processes. He was also a creator of, and influenced by, pragmatism. Pragmatism gave Mead a powerful faith in science and, more generally, in conduct motivated by reflective intelligence. It, like behaviorism, led Mead to focus on what people actually “do” in the social world. He was also strongly influenced by Hegel, and this is manifest in a number of places (e.g., his focus on evolution), especially in his dialectical approach to the social world.

Substantively, Mead’s theory accorded primacy and priority to the social world. That is, it is out of the social world that consciousness, the mind, the self, and so on emerge. The most basic unit in his social theory is the act, which includes four dialectically related stages—impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation. Even in his thoughts on the act, Mead did not emphasize external stimuli (as a behaviorist would); rather, he held that a stimulus is an opportunity, not a compulsion, to act. A social act involves two or more persons, and the basic mechanism of the social act is the gesture. Whereas lower animals and humans are capable of having a conversation of gestures, only humans can communicate the conscious meaning of their gestures.

Humans are peculiarly able to create vocal gestures, and this capacity leads to the distinctive human ability to develop and use significant symbols. Significant symbols lead to the development of language and the distinctive capacity of humans to communicate, in the full sense of the term, with one another. Significant symbols also make possible thinking as well as symbolic interaction.

Mead looked at an array of mental processes as part of the larger social process; such mental processes include reflective intelligence, consciousness, mental images, meaning, and, most generally, the mind. Humans have the distinctive capacity to carry on an inner conversation with themselves. All the mental processes, in Mead’s view, are lodged not in the brain but rather in the social process.

The self is the ability to take oneself as an object. Again, the self arises within the social process. The general mechanism of the self is the ability of people to put themselves in the place of others and to act as others act and to see themselves as others see them. Mead traced the genesis of the self through the play and game stages of childhood. Especially important in the latter stage is the emergence of the generalized other. The ability to see oneself from the viewpoint of the community is essential to the emergence of the self as well as of organized group activities. The self also has two phases—the “I,” which is the unpredictable and creative aspect of the self, and the “me,” which is the organized set of attitudes of others assumed by the actor. Social control is manifest through the “me,” whereas the “I” is the source of innovation in society.

Mead had relatively little to say about society, which he saw most generally as the ongoing social processes that precede mind and self. Mead largely lacked a macro sense of society. Institutions are defined as little more than collective habits. Mead did have a strong sense of evolution, especially of reflective intelligence as well as of science, the latter being merely a concrete and formalized manifestation of that intelligence. Finally,
Mead manifested dialectical thinking throughout his theoretical system.
Notes

1. For a criticism of this distinction, see D. Miller (1982b, 1985).

2. This is the label that was ultimately affixed (by Herbert Blumer) to the sociological theory derived, in significant part, from Mead's ideas.

3. However, Mead used the term *intelligence* inconsistently; sometimes it includes mental processes.

4. Here is one place where Mead was using *intelligence* in a different sense from that employed in the previous discussion.

5. Although Mead used the term *game*, it is clear, as Mitchell Aboulafia (1986:198) pointed out, that he meant any system of organized responses (e.g., the family).
16 Alfred Schutz
Alongside classical theorists George Herbert Mead and Georg Simmel, Alfred Schutz offers what we would now call a microsociological theory. Schutz’s approach is unique because it draws on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and in particular the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Briefly, phenomenology focuses on the analysis of everyday subjective experience. Schutz was, as biographer Michael Barber put it, “the quintessential philosopher of everyday life” (2004:xii). Like other microsociological approaches, Schutz’s social phenomenology emphasizes the intersubjective nature of social life and personal experience. Where Husserl’s philosophical phenomenology asked: What is my experience of the world? Schutz’s social phenomenology asks: What is my experience of other persons? And, how does that experience make a social world possible? We are always in relationship to others, and this must be the subject matter of social phenomenology. Moreover, like other microsociological perspectives Schutz’s view treats human interaction as something that is always situated within larger social structures, such as culture. Thus, even though Schutz does not offer extensive analysis of macrosociological structures, their significance in framing social experience and action is never forgotten.

This said, if the reader can handle the philosophical density of Schutz’s writing, he provides an approach to the analysis of subjective experience unparalleled in its rigor to any other classical sociological theorist. Beyond Schutz’s own writings, he is especially noteworthy for his impact on several important contemporary sociological theories: ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1979), and social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Schutz’s most important theoretical statement, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932/1967), was published in the 1930s—the same decade that witnessed the publication of other now-classical theoretical works such as Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society* and Talcott Parsons’s *The Structure of Social Action*. 
The Ideas of Edmund Husserl

Before turning to the theories of Alfred Schutz, we need to deal with the ideas of his most important intellectual predecessor, the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Although other thinkers (e.g., Henri Bergson and Max Weber) had a strong impact on Schutz, the influence of Husserl stands above that of all the others.

Husserl's highly complicated philosophy is not easily translated into sociological concepts; indeed, a good portion of it is not directly relevant to sociology (Srubar, 1984). We discuss here a few of his ideas that proved useful to Alfred Schutz as well as to other phenomenological sociologists.

In general, Husserl believed that people view the world as a highly ordered place; actors are always engaged in the active and highly complex process of ordering the world. However, people are unaware that they are patterning the world; hence, they do not question the process by which this is accomplished. Actors see the social world as naturally ordered, not structured by them. Unlike people in the everyday world, phenomenologists are acutely aware that patterning is taking place, and that ordering process becomes for them an important subject of phenomenological investigation (Freeman, 1980).

Husserl's scientific phenomenology involves a commitment to penetrate the various layers constructed by actors in the social world in order to get to the essential structure of consciousness, the transcendental ego. Schutz defined the *transcendental ego* as “the universe of our conscious life, the stream of thought in its integrity, with all its activities and with all its cogitations and experiences” (1973:105).

The idea of the transcendent ego reflects Husserl's interest in the basic and invariant properties of human consciousness. As Schutz said, “According to Husserl, phenomenology aims to be an eidetical science, dealing not with existence but with essence” (1973:113), especially the essence of consciousness—the transcendental ego.

Although he is often misinterpreted on this point, Husserl did not have a mentalistic, metaphysical conception of consciousness. From his viewpoint, consciousness is not a thing or a place, but a process. Consciousness is found not in the head of the actor but in the relationship between the actor and objects in the world. Husserl expressed this in the idea of *intentionality*. For him, consciousness is always consciousness of something, some object. Consciousness is found in this relationship; consciousness is not interior to the actor. James Heap and Phillip Roth argued simply that “consciousness is intentional” (1973:355).

Furthermore, meaning inheres not in objects but in the relationship of actors to objects. This conception of consciousness as a process that gives meaning to objects is at the heart of Husserl's phenomenology and is the starting point for Schutzian theory.

Another key to Husserl's work was his orientation to the *scientific* study of the basic structures of consciousness. Husserl sought to develop “philosophy as a rigorous science” (Kockelmans, 1967b:26). However, to Husserl, science did not mean empiricism and statistical analysis of empirical data. In fact, he feared that such a science would reject consciousness as an object of scientific scrutiny and that consciousness would be found either to be too metaphysical or to have been turned into something physical.
What Husserl did mean by science was a philosophy that was methodologically rigorous, systematic, and critical. In using science in this way, Husserl believed that phenomenologists ultimately could arrive at absolutely valid knowledge of the basic structures of actors’ “lived experience” (especially that which is conscious). This orientation to science has had two effects on later phenomenologists, including Alfred Schutz. First, phenomenologists continue to eschew the tools of modern social-science research (although they do research; see Psathas, 1989)—standardized methods, high-powered statistics, and computerized results. They prefer, as did Husserl, attention to, and description of, all social phenomena—including social situations, events, activities, interaction, and social objects—as experienced by human beings. Second, phenomenologists continue to oppose vague, “soft” intuitionism. In other words, they are opposed to “subjectivism” that is not concerned with discovering the basic structures of phenomena as experienced by people. Philosophizing about consciousness is a rigorous and systematic enterprise.

Husserl conceived of actors’ natural standpoint, or their “natural attitude,” as the major obstacle to the scientific discovery of phenomenological processes. Because of actors’ natural attitude, conscious-ordering processes are hidden to them. These processes will remain hidden to phenomenologists unless they are able to overcome their own natural attitudes. Phenomenologists must be able to accomplish the very difficult task of “disconnecting,” or “setting aside” (“bracketing”), the natural attitude so that they will be able to get at the most basic aspects of consciousness involved in the ordering of the world (Freeman, 1980). In Husserl’s view, the natural attitude is a source of bias and distortion to the phenomenologist.

After the natural attitude is set aside, or “bracketed,” the phenomenologist can begin to examine the invariant properties of consciousness that govern all people. Here is the way Schutz described Husserl’s orientation on this issue:

The phenomenologist does not deny the existence of the outer world, but for his analytical purpose he makes up his mind to suspend belief in its existence—that is, to refrain intentionally and systematically from all judgments related directly or indirectly to the existence of the outer world…. Husserl called this procedure “putting the world in brackets” or “performing the phenomenological reduction” … [to] go beyond the natural attitude of man living within the world he accepts, be it reality or mere appearance … to disclose the pure field of consciousness.

(Schutz, 1973:104)

The phenomenologist also must set aside the incidental experiences of life that tend to dominate consciousness. Husserl’s ultimate objective was to get at the pure form of consciousness, stripped of all empirical content.

Ilja Srubar (1984) argued that Husserl not only did a rigorous philosophy of consciousness but also laid the groundwork for a phenomenological sociology. That is, Husserl found it necessary to extend his work to the world of interpersonal relations, the “life-world.” Thus Husserl’s work helps point to the position that “phenomenology must become a science of the life world” (Srubar, 1984:70). However, Schutz concluded that
“the least satisfactory part of [Husserl’s] analysis is that dealing with sociality and social groups” (1975:38). As a result, whereas Husserl’s work largely turned inward to the transcendental ego, Schutz’s work turned outward to intersubjectivity, the social world, and the life-world. Here is the way Helmut Wagner explained the task confronting Schutz:

The phenomenological method, by definition, serves the exploration of the solitary consciousness. It can procure access to the social realm of human experience only if it offers a solution for what Husserl called the problem of intersubjectivity. A viable theory of intersubjectivity, in turn, would be the strongest, albeit indirect, support for the sociology of understanding that phenomenology could supply…. Schutz placed the whole problem on the level of mundanity, that of everyday life. Here, he was confident, a phenomenological-psychological bridge between ego and alter could be found.

(Wagner, 1983:43)
Alfred Schutz was not widely known during his lifetime, and only in recent years has his work attracted the attention of large numbers of sociologists. Although his obscurity was in part a result of his intellectual orientation—his then highly unusual interest in phenomenology—a more important cause was his very unusual career as a sociologist.

Schutz's biographer, Michael Barber, described him as a moral and caring man: “He lived an exemplary life as a husband, father, and friend; as a lawyer/businessman assisting hundreds to escape Hitler’s domination; as a peacemaker in the fractious international phenomenology movement; and as a participant with other committed intellectuals in the incipient civil rights movement” (Barber, 2004:xi). Schutz was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1899. Several months before Schutz was born, his father died. As a result, Schutz was raised by his mother and his father’s brother, who married his mother and who Schutz took to be his father until he was seventeen. Despite the abstraction of his later work, from an early age Schutz wrote poetry and played the piano (Barber, 2004). He received his academic training at the University of Vienna (Wagner, 1983).

Soon after completing his law examination, he embarked on a lifelong career in banking. Although rewarding economically, banking did not satisfy his need for deeper meaning in his life. Schutz found that meaning in his work on phenomenological sociology. He was not an academician in the 1920s, but many of his friends were, and he participated in a number of informal lecture and discussion circles, and in particular was involved with the Austrian School of Economics (Barber, 2004). At the same time, Schutz was drawn to Weberian theory, especially Weber's work on action and the ideal type. Although impressed with Weber's work, Schutz sought to overcome its weaknesses by integrating ideas from the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Henri Bergson. In this, Schutz was motivated to provide the Austrian School of Economics with a scientific, subjective theory of action (Barber, 2004; Prendergast, 1986). These influences led to the publication by Schutz in 1932 of what was to become a very important book in sociology, The Phenomenology of the Social World. It was not translated into English until 1967, so a wide appreciation of Schutz's work in the United States was delayed thirty-five years.
As World War II approached, because he was Jewish, Schutz and his family (including a newborn son) were forced to emigrate, with an intervening period in Paris, to the United States. There, for many years he divided his time between serving as legal counsel to a number of banks and writing about and teaching phenomenological sociology. Simultaneously with his work in banking, Schutz began teaching courses in 1943 at the New School for Social Research in New York City (Prendergast, 2005). As Richard Grathoff pointed out, the result was that "the social theorist for whom scientific thought and everyday life defined two rather distinct and separate realms of experience upheld a similar division in his personal life" (1978:112). Not until 1956 did Schutz give up his dual career and concentrate entirely on teaching and writing phenomenological sociology. Because of his interest in phenomenology, his dual career, and his teaching at the then avant-garde New School, Schutz remained on the periphery of sociology during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Schutz's work and his influence on students (e.g., Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Harold Garfinkel) moved him to the center of sociological theory.

Another factor in Schutz's marginal position in sociological theory was that his theory seemed highly abstract and irrelevant to the mundane social world. Although Schutz separated theory from reality, he did not feel that his work was irrelevant to the world in which he lived. To put it in terms of his phenomenology, he saw a relationship between the everyday construction of reality and the pregiven historical and cultural world. To think otherwise is to think that the man who fled National Socialism (Nazism) regarded his academic work as irrelevant. The following quotation from one of his letters indicates that although Schutz was not optimistic, he was not prepared to accept the irrelevance of his theorizing and, more generally, the social construction of reality to the world as a whole:

You are still optimistic enough to believe that phenomenology may save itself among the ruins of this world—as the philosophica aera perennis? I do not believe so. More likely the African natives must prepare themselves for the ideas of national socialism. This shall not prevent us from dying the way we have lived; and we must try, therefore, to build ... order into our world, which we must find lacking in—our world. The whole conflict is hidden in this shift of emphasis.

(Schutz, cited in Grathoff, 1978:130)

In short, although the ability of people to affect the larger society is restricted by such phenomena as Nazism, they must continue to strive to build a social and cultural reality that is not beyond their reach and control.

Alfred Schutz died in 1959.

We say more about intersubjectivity and the life-world later, but before we do, we need to discuss Schutz’s ideas on science and typifications.
Science and the Social World

As was true of Husserl, Schutz saw phenomenology as a rigorous science. He explicitly countered many of the critics of phenomenology by arguing that it is “not based upon a kind of uncontrollable intuition or metaphysical revelation” (Schutz, 1973:101). Also in accord with Husserl, Schutz saw science as a theoretical and conceptual endeavor. The science of sociology, from Schutz’s point of view, is not merely about describing the social world but involves the construction of rigorous conceptual and theoretical models of that world. As Schutz put it:

We should certainly be surprised if we found a cartographer in mapping a town restricting himself to collecting information from natives. Nevertheless, social scientists frequently choose this strange method. They forget that their scientific work is done on a level of [theoretical] interpretation and understanding different from the naive attitudes of orientation and interpretation peculiar to people in daily life.

(Schutz, 1976:67)

We gain considerable insight into Schutz’s views on science when we understand that he considered science to be one of a multitude of “realities.” To Schutz there are a number of different realities, including the worlds of dreams, art, religion, and the insane. The paramount reality, however, is the intersubjective world of everyday life (the life-world) because it is “the archetype of our experience of reality. All the other provinces of meaning may be considered as its modifications” (Schutz, 1973:xlii). As we will see, Schutz was focally concerned in his phenomenological sociology with the life-world, but our interest here is with the relationship of the life-world to another reality, that of science.

Life-World versus Science

There are several key differences between the life-world and the world of science, especially social science. First, the commonsense actor in the life-world is oriented toward dealing pragmatically with the mundane problems of everyday life. The social scientist, in contrast, is “aloof,” a “disinterested observer” who is not pragmatically involved in the life-world of the actors being studied and their mundane problems. Second, the stock of knowledge of the commonsense actor is derived from the everyday world, whereas the scientist works with the stock of knowledge that belongs to the body of science. The social scientist exists in a world of problems stated, solutions suggested, methods worked out, and results obtained by other social scientists. Third, in their theorizing, as we have already discussed, social scientists must detach themselves from (must “bracket”) their own biographical situations in the life-world and operate in that province of meaning labeled “the world of science.” Commonsense actors, in contrast, are enmeshed in their biographical situations and operate in the life-world. Not only do these three differences help us define the world of science, but furthermore the social scientist who fulfills these criteria can be seen as having attained the scientific attitude needed to study the life-world. To have the proper scientific attitude, social scientists must be detached from (i.e., have a nonpragmatic interest in) the life-world of those they are studying, enmeshed in the world of...
science, and must bracket their own biographical situation within the life-world.

Although the world of everyday life is populated by people who act sensibly or reasonably, scientists must create a model of that world which is composed of people who act rationally. In the everyday world, people act sensibly, that is, their actions are in accord with socially approved rules for dealing with typical problems using typical means to achieve typical ends. People may also act reasonably in making “judicious” choices of means to ends, even if they merely follow traditional or habitual patterns. Although people may act sensibly or reasonably in the everyday world, it is only in the theoretical models created by social scientists that they act rationally in the full sense of the term, possessing “clear and distinct insight into the ends, the means, and the secondary results” (Schutz, 1973:28). (Here Schutz is using rationality in the same way that Weber used means-ends rationality.) Schutz makes it quite clear that rationality is a theoretical construct in his work: “Thus, the concept of rationality in the strict sense already defined does not refer to actions within the common-sense experience of everyday life in the social world; it is the expression for a particular type of construct of certain specific models of the social world made by the social scientist for certain methodological purposes” (1973:42). Action in everyday life is, at best, only partly rational. People who act sensibly or reasonably are rational only to some degree; they are far from fully rational. Thus, it is the task of the social scientist to construct rational theoretical models of the largely less-than-fully-rational everyday social world. This need to construct such models is premised on the belief that the social scientist can, indeed must, use rational models to analyze the less-than-rational behavior that is found in the life-world. (Again, this is similar to Weber and his development and use of ideal types.)

But the everyday social world is “meaningful” to the actors in it, and the social scientist is confronted with the problem of constructing fully rational systems of knowledge of the subjective-meaning structures of everyday life. Schutz found himself in the paradoxical position of attempting to develop a subjective sociology in the tradition of Weber while also meeting the demands of a rigorous conception of science. As Schutz put the question (the answer to which lies at the heart of his theoretical system): “How is it, then, possible to grasp by a system of objective knowledge subjective meaning structures?” (1973:35). Schutz’s response is that “it is possible to construct a model of a sector of the social world consisting of typical human interaction and to analyze this typical interaction pattern as to the meaning it might have for the personal types of actors” (36).

**Constructing Ideal Types**

The ability to accomplish this is based on the fact that both in the world of everyday life and in science we rely on constructs (ideal types) in order to interpret reality and grasp the part of reality that is relevant to us. The constructs that we use in the life-world are first-order constructs (“typifications”; see the next section), and the social scientist develops second-order constructs on the basis of these first-order constructs. It is this building of scientific constructs on everyday constructs that makes an objective, rational science of subjectivity possible. However, to meet the demands of science, the meaning of the world from the actor’s perspective must be captured in abstraction from its unique and unpredictable expression within immediate reality. Schutz was not concerned with specific, unique actors but with typical actors and typical actions. All observers in the life-world develop constructs that allow them to understand what is going on there, but the ability to understand
the life-world is increased in science because the (scientific) observer systematically creates much more abstract and standardized constructs with which to understand everyday life.

The key to Schutz’s scientific approach is the construction of these second-order constructs or, in more conventional sociological terms, ideal types of social actors and social action. (Good examples are set forth in Schutz’s essays on the “stranger” and the “homecomer.”) Developing second-order constructs involves the theoretical replacement of human beings in the life-world with puppets (or as Schutz often called them, “homunculi”) created by the social scientist. The scientific model of the life-world is “not peopled with human beings in their full humanity, but with puppets, with types; they are constructed as though they could perform working actions and reactions” (Schutz, 1973:255). Schutz thought in terms of types of people as well as types of courses of action that actors might take.

Social scientists restrict the puppets’ consciousness to what is necessary to perform the typical course of action relevant to the scientific problem under consideration. The puppets are not able to selectively perceive objects in their environment that may be relevant for the solution of problems at hand. They exist in situations created not by them but by the social scientist. The puppets do not choose, nor do they have knowledge outside of the typical knowledge granted them by the social scientist. The following is one of Schutz’s most complete articulations of the nature of the social scientist’s puppets:

A merely specious consciousness is imputed to them by the scientist, which is constructed in such a way that its presupposed stock of knowledge at hand (including the ascribed set of invariant motives) would make actions originating from it subjectively understandable, provided that these actions were performed by real actors within the social world. But the puppet and his artificial consciousness is not subjected to the ontological conditions of human beings. The homunculus was not born, he does not grow old, and he will not die. He has no hopes and fears; he does not know anxiety as the chief motive of all of his deeds. He is not free in the sense that his acting could transgress the limits his creator, the social scientist, has predetermined. He cannot, therefore, have other conflicts of interest and motives than those the social scientist has imputed to him. He cannot err, if to err is not his typical destiny. He cannot choose, except among the alternatives the social scientist has put before him as standing to his choice … the homunculus, placed into a social relationship is involved therein in his totality. He is nothing else but the originator of his typical function because the artificial consciousness imputed to him contains merely those elements which are necessary to make such functions subjectively meaningful.

(Schutz, 1973:41)

Thus, through the construction of ideal-typical actors and actions, the social scientist develops the tools needed to analyze the social world.

The construction of these puppets (or ideal types, more generally) is not an arbitrary process. To adequately reflect the subjective reality of the life-world and the demands of a rigorous science, ideal types must meet the following criteria:
1. Postulate of relevance: Following Weber, Schutz asserted that the topic being investigated in the social world should determine what is to be studied and how it is to be approached. In other words, what the social scientist does must be relevant to the topic being investigated in the life-world.

2. Postulate of adequacy: According to this principle, ideal types should be constructed by the social scientist so that the typifications of the actors' behavior in the life-world would make sense to the actors themselves as well as to their contemporaries.

3. Postulate of logical consistency: Types must be constructed with a high degree of consistency, clarity, and distinctness and must be compatible with the principles of formal logic. Fulfillment of this postulate “warrants the objective validity of the thought objects constructed by the social scientist” (Schutz, 1973:43).

4. Postulate of compatibility: The types constructed by the social scientist must be compatible with the extant body of scientific knowledge or must demonstrate why at least part of this body of knowledge is inadequate.

5. Postulate of subjective interpretation: The scientific types, as well as the more general model of the social world, must be based on, and be compatible with, the subjective meaning that action has for real actors in the world of everyday life.

In Schutz's view, the social scientist who adheres to these five postulates will create types and models that meet the need to be true both to the subjective meaning of actors in the life-world and to the demands of a rigorous science.
Typifications and Recipes

In the preceding section, we discussed Schutz’s use of ideal types (second-order constructs) to analyze the social world scientifically. However, as we have already mentioned, people also develop and use typifications (first-order constructs) in the social world. In any given situation in the world of everyday life, an action is determined “by means of a type constituted in earlier experiences” (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:229). Typifications ignore individual, unique features and focus on only generic and homogeneous characteristics.

Typification takes many forms. When we label something (e.g., a man, a dog), we are engaging in typification. More generally, anytime we are using language, we are typifying, that is, we are applying, linguistic types. Indeed, Schutz called language “the typifying medium par excellence” (1973:75). Language can be thought of as a “treasure house” of types that we use to make sense of the social world. Although we routinely typify others, it is also possible for people to engage in self-typification. “Man typifies to a certain extent his own situation within the social world and the various relations he has to his fellow-men and cultural objects” (Schutz, 1976:233).

The linking of typifications to language makes it clear that typifications exist in the larger society and that people acquire and store typifications throughout the socialization process, indeed throughout their lives. The types that we use are largely socially derived and socially approved. They have stood the test of time and have come to be institutionalized as traditional and habitual tools for dealing with social life. Although the individual may create some typifications, most of them are preconstituted and derived from the larger society.

Schutz sometimes talked of recipes, which, like typifications, “serve as techniques for understanding or at least controlling aspects of … experience” (Natanson, 1973:xxix). People use recipes to handle the myriad routine situations that they encounter each day. Thus, when someone greets us with the recipe “How are you?” we respond with the recipe “Fine, and you?” Continuing the cooking analogy, Schutz argued that we function with “cook-book knowledge … recipes … to deal with the routine matters of daily life…. Most of our daily activities from rising to going to bed are of this kind. They are performed by following recipes reduced to cultural habits of unquestioned platitudes” (1976:73–74). Even when we encounter unusual or problematic situations, we first try to use our recipes. Only when it is abundantly clear that our recipes won’t work do we abandon them and seek to create, to work out mentally, new ways of dealing with situations.

Schutz and Thomas Luckmann (1973:231) outlined conditions under which situations become problematic and people must create new ways of dealing with them (new recipes or typifications). If there is no recipe available to handle a novel situation, or if a recipe does not allow one to handle the situation it is supposed to deal with, a new one must be created. In other words, when the stock of knowledge currently available is inadequate, the person must add to it by creating new recipes (or typifications).

Because of the recurrent existence of problematic situations, people cannot rely totally on recipes and typifications. They must be adaptive enough to deal with unforeseen circumstances. People need “practical intelligence” to deal with unpredictable situations by assessing alternative courses of action and devising new
ways of handling situations.
The Life-World

The *life-world* (or *Lebenswelt*) is Schutz's term (derived from Husserl) for the world in which the taken-for-granted, the mundane, takes place. Schutz used many terms to communicate his sense of this world, including "common-sense world," "world of everyday life," "everyday working world," "mundane reality," "the paramount reality of commonsense life," and so on (Natanson, 1973:xxv). It is in this world that people operate in the "natural attitude"; that is, they take the world for granted and do not doubt its typifications and recipes until a problematic situation arises.

Schutz defined six basic characteristics of the life-world. First, there is a special tension of consciousness, which Schutz labeled "wide-awakeness" (1973:213), in which the actor gives "full attention to life and its requirements." Second, the actor suspends doubt in the existence of this world. Third, it is in the life-world that people engage in working; that is, they engage in "action in the outer world, based upon a project and characterized by the intention to bring about the projected state of affairs by bodily movement" (Schutz, 1973:212). It is work that lies at the heart of the life-world:

> The core region of the life-world is the world of working…. Specifically, it is a sphere of activities directed upon objects, animals, and persons "within our actual reach." Typically, operations in it follow "tested recipes of action": it is "my world of routine activities." … Such working is planful physical acting upon tangible objects in order to shape and use them for tangible purposes.

(Wagner, 1983:290)

Fourth, there is a specific form of experiencing one's self in which the working self is experienced as the total self. Fifth, the life-world is characterized by a specific form of sociality involving the "common intersubjective world of communication and social action" (Schutz, 1973:230). Obviously, the worlds of dreams and fantasies are not intersubjective worlds. Finally, in the life-world there is a specific time perspective that involves the intersection of the person's own flow of time and the flow of time in the larger society. By contrast, in dreams or fantasies the person's flow of time is usually out of touch with the flow of time in the larger society. That is, one may fantasize, for example, about life in the Middle Ages while one is living in the twentieth century.

Although Schutz wrote often as if there is only one life-world, the fact is that each of us has his or her own life-world; however, there are many common elements in all of them. Thus, others belong to our life-world and we belong to the life-worlds of many others.

The life-world is an intersubjective world, but it is one that existed long before our birth; it was created by our predecessors. It (particularly typifications and recipes, but also social institutions and so on) is given to us to experience and to interpret. Thus, in experiencing the life-world, we are experiencing an obdurate world that constrains what we do (Ho, 2008). However, we are not simply dominated by the preexisting structure of the life-world:
We have to dominate it and we have to change it in order to realize the purposes which we pursue within it among our fellow-men … these objects offer resistance to our acts which we have either to overcome or to which we have to yield … a pragmatic motive governs our natural attitude toward the world of everyday life. World, in this sense, is something that we have to modify by our actions or that modifies our actions.

(Schutz, 1973:209)

Here we begin to get a sense of Schutz’s thinking as dialectical, with actors and structures mutually affecting one another. Wagner took such a dialectical position when he argued that Schutz’s ideas on the life-world blend individual experience “not only with those of social interaction and therefore with the life-worlds of others but also with the socially pregiven interpretive schemes and prescriptions [typifications and recipes] for practical conduct” (1983:289).

This dialectic is even clearer in Schutz’s thinking about the cultural world. On the one hand, it is clear that the cultural world was created by people in the past as well as in the present because it “originates in and has been instituted by human actions, our own and our fellow-men’s, contemporaries and predecessors. All cultural objects—tools, symbols, language systems, works of art, social institutions, etc.—point back by their very origin and meaning to the activities of human subjects” (Schutz, 1973:329). On the other hand, this cultural world is external and coercive of actors: “I find myself in my everyday life within a world not of my own making … I was born into a pre-organized social world which will survive me, a world shared from the outset with fellow-men who are organized in groups” (329).

In his analysis of the life-world, Schutz was concerned mainly with the shared social stock of knowledge that leads to more or less habitual action. We have already discussed knowledge of typifications and recipes, which is a major component of the stock of knowledge. Schutz viewed such knowledge as the most variable element in our stock of knowledge because, in a problematic situation, we are able to come up with innovative ways of handling the situation. Less likely to become problematic are the other two aspects of our stock of knowledge. Knowledge of skills (e.g., how to walk) is the most basic form of knowledge in that it rarely becomes problematic (an exception in the case of walking would be temporary paralysis) and thus is accorded a high degree of certainty. Useful knowledge (e.g., driving a car or playing the piano) is a definite solution to a situation that was once problematic. Useful knowledge is more problematic (e.g., needing to think about one’s driving in an emergency situation) than knowledge of skills, but it is not as likely to become problematic as recipes and typifications.
Intersubjectivity

Most broadly, Schutz’s phenomenological sociology focuses on intersubjectivity not only because intersubjectivity was largely ignored by Husserl, but also because Schutz believed it to be taken for granted and unexplored by any other science. The study of intersubjectivity seeks to answer questions such as these: How do we know other motives, interests, and meanings? Other selves? How is a reciprocity of perspectives possible? How is mutual understanding and communication possible?

An intersubjective world is not a private world; it is common to all. It exists “because we live in it as men among other men, bound to them through common influence and work, understanding others and being understood by them” (Schutz, 1973:10). Intersubjectivity exists in the “vivid present” in which we speak and listen to each other. We share the same time and space with others. “This simultaneity is the essence of intersubjectivity, for it means that I grasp the subjectivity of the alter ego at the same time as I live in my own stream of consciousness. … And this grasp in simultaneity of the other as well as his reciprocal grasp of me makes possible our being in the world together” (Natanson, 1973:xxxii–xxxiii; italics added).

The italicized portion of the last quotation gets to the essence of Schutz’s thinking on intersubjectivity. Schutz was interested in interaction, but mainly as the vehicle whereby people grasp each other’s consciousnesses, the manner in which they relate to one another intersubjectively.

Knowledge

Schutz also used the idea of intersubjectivity in a broader sense to mean anything that is social. He argued that knowledge is intersubjective (or social) in three senses. First, there is a reciprocity of perspectives in which we assume that other people exist and objects are known or knowable by all. In spite of this reciprocity of perspectives, it is clear that the same object may mean somewhat different things to different people. This difficulty is overcome in the social world by the existence of two “idealizations.” The idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints assumes that if we stood in the place of others, we would see things as they do. The idealization of the congruency of the system of relevance assumes that we can ignore our differences and that objects are defined sufficiently alike to allow us to proceed on a practical basis as if the definitions were identical. (Schutz called these two idealizations the “general thesis of reciprocal perspectives.”)

The second sense in which knowledge is intersubjective (or social) is in the social origin of knowledge. Individuals create a very small part of their own knowledge; most of it exists in shared stocks of knowledge and is acquired through social interaction with parents, teachers, and peers.

Third, knowledge is intersubjective in that there is a social distribution of knowledge. That is, the knowledge people possess varies according to their position in the social structure. In our commonsense thinking, we take into account the fact that the stock of actual knowledge varies from individual to individual according to their social positions.
The World Wars: Historical Contexts

World War I impacted the lives of many theorists discussed in this book. Émile Durkheim lost his son André, and many of his students, to World War I (Fournier, 2007/2013). Max Weber served as the director of a military hospital and, at the end of the war, was a member of the German delegation that signed the Treaty of Versailles (Radkau, 2005/2009). The classical theorists also wrote about the war. Hans Joas (2003) pointed out that Weber enthusiastically described the war as a defense of the German national community. Georg Simmel argued that the war offered an opportunity to “rupture” the objective, inauthentic, culture that had settled over modern Europe (Joas, 2003:65). Durkheim criticized nationalist sentiments and said that the French had to win the war to preserve the values of cosmopolitan Enlightenment. Alfred Schutz lived through and was impacted by both World War I and World War II.

World War I began in July 1914 following the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. It lasted until the Allied victory in November 1918. The war divided Europe between the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary and the Allies of Britain, France and Russia (and later the United States). Though exact numbers are uncertain, it has been estimated that around 8.5 million soldiers were killed in the war, and 13 million citizens died of causes related to the war (Showalter, 2016).

Most notoriously, the war was fought out of miles of trenches that marked the front lines. The trenches were muddy, smelly, subject to constant artillery bombardment, and filled with dead and dying soldiers. In The Great War Marc Ferro (1973/2002:101) provides a soldier’s first-hand account of a tunnel in the trenches:

The air in the tunnel was foetid; I’d rather have stayed in the open even to die. Outside you risked a bullet; here you could go mad. There was a pile of sand-bags up to the vault, and this was our refuge; outside the storm went on, the hammering of shell of all types. Above our heads, under the thundering vault, there were a few filthy electric bulbs casting a shadowy light, with clouds of flies circling round them. They buzzed on, irritantly, and landed on you; even if you struck at them they would not get off.

Schutz, seventeen at the time, joined the Austrian army’s artillery division. Barber (2004:4) described Schutz’s participation:

Holding the rank of lieutenant in the artillery, Schutz performed assorted dangerous military services on the Italian front, including reconnaissance, poison gas protection, signalling and the reparation of disrupted communications…. After he spent ten months at the front and witnessed great carnage, the time for his first furlough arrived, and he took the last train returning to Vienna. The rest of his regiment were taken prisoners, the war ceased, and the Central Powers had been defeated.

Though World War I concluded in 1918, the punishing terms of the Treaty of Versailles, against Germany, set the stage for the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of World War II.

Larger and more devastating than World War I, World War II also had a profound effect on sociological theory. The Nazi genocidal attack on Jewish populations (the Holocaust) forced many academics to flee Europe for England and North America. This included sociologists Karl Mannheim (Chapter 14), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (members of the Frankfurt school of critical theory), Walter Benjamin (who committed suicide as he tried to escape through the south of France), and Alfred Schutz. Schutz ended up in New York and became involved in the war effort. He worked tirelessly to secure safe passage from Europe to North America for Jewish friends and family. He also consulted with the American government’s Board of Economic Warfare and advised on plans to re-establish the Austrian economy after the war (Barber, 2004).

World Wars I and II left sociology with many questions: How is it that wealthy, educated societies with rich artistic and scientific cultures could descend into such total and brutal war? How was an event like the Holocaust possible? Has the world changed such that it can avoid such wars in the future? (Bauman, 1989/2000)

Thus, whereas Husserl identified the transcendental ego as his primary focus, Schutz turned phenomenology outward to a concern for the intersubjective, social world. (Although this is an important difference, we should not lose sight of the fact that both thinkers focused on subjectivity—Husserl within the realm of
Private Components of Knowledge

Schutz also was aware that all elements of the cultural realm can and often do vary from individual to individual because personal experience differs. The stock of knowledge is “biographically articulated”:

That means that I “know” more or less adequately that it is the “result” of prior situations. And further, I “know” that this, my situation, is in that respect absolutely “unique.” Indeed, the stock of knowledge, through which I determine the present situation, has its “unique” biographical articulation. This refers not only to the content, the “meaning” of all the prior experiences sedimented in it, in situations. It refers also to the intensity, … duration, and sequence of these experiences. This circumstance is of singular importance, since it really constitutes the individual stock of knowledge.

(Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:111–112)

Thus, according to Schutz, the stock of knowledge always has a private component. However, even this unique and private component of the stock of knowledge is not solely of the actor’s own making: “It must be stressed … that sequence, experiential depth and nearness, and even the duration of experiences and the acquisition of knowledge, are socially objectivated and determined. In other words, there are social categories of biographical articulation” (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:113).

Because of their source in individual biography, private stocks of knowledge are not part of the life-world. Because they are biographical in nature, Schutz felt that the unique and private components of knowledge are not amenable to scientific study. They are, in Schutz’s view, nonetheless important components of the everyday life of actual actors.
Realms of the Social World

Schutz identified four distinct realms of social reality. Each is an abstraction of the social world and is distinguished by its degree of immediacy (the degree to which situations are within reach of the actor) and determinability (the degree to which they can be controlled by the actor). The four realms are umwelt, the realm of directly experienced social reality; mitwelt, the realm of indirectly experienced social reality; folgewelt, the realm of successors; and vorwelt, the realm of predecessors. The realms of successors and predecessors (folgewelt and vorwelt) were of peripheral interest to Schutz. However, we deal with them briefly because the contrast between them illustrates some of the characteristics of Schutz's major focus—the umwelt and the mitwelt.

Folgewelt and Vorwelt

The future (folgewelt) is a purely residual category in Schutz's work (in contrast to Marx's, for example, where it plays a crucial role in his dialectic). It is a totally free and completely indeterminant world. It can be anticipated by the social scientist only in a very general way and cannot be depicted in any great detail. One cannot place great stock in the ideal types and models of the future constructed by the social scientist. Thus, there is little that Schutz's phenomenological science has to offer to the conventional scientist seeking to understand or predict the future.3

The past (vorwelt), on the other hand, is somewhat more amenable to analysis by the social scientist. The action of those who lived in the past is totally determined; there is no element of freedom, because the causes of their actions, the actions themselves, and their outcomes have already occurred. Despite its determinacy, the study of predecessors presents difficulties for a subjective sociology. It is difficult to interpret the actions of people who lived in an earlier time because we would probably have to use contemporary categories of thought in the historical glance back rather than the categories that prevailed at the time. The interpretation of contemporaries is likely to be more accurate because sociologists share interpretive categories with those whose action they seek to understand. Thus, although a subjective sociology of the past is possible, the probability of misinterpretation is great.

The essential point here is that the objective for Schutz was to develop a sociology based on the interpretations of the social world made by the actors being studied. It is difficult to know the interpretations of predecessors and impossible to understand those of successors. However, it is possible to understand contemporaries (mitwelt) and the interpretations of those with whom we are in immediate face-to-face contact (umwelt).

Umwelt and We Relations

The umwelt involves what Schutz called “consociates,” or people involved in face-to-face relationships with one another. Thus, the idea of the umwelt is “equally applicable to an intimate talk between friends and the co-presence of strangers in a railroad car” (Schutz, 1973:16). Being in face-to-face contact is all that is
required to be considered part of the umwelt. There is a unique character and intensity in the umwelt:

Each partner participates in the on-rolling life of the other, can grasp in a vivid present the other’s thoughts as they are built up step by step. They may thus share one another’s anticipations of the future as plans, or hopes or anxieties. In brief, consociates are mutually involved in one another’s biography; they are growing older together; they live, as we may call it, in a pure we-relationship.

(Schutz, 1973:16–17)

We relations are defined by a relatively high degree of intimacy, which is determined by the extent to which the actors are acquainted with one another’s personal biographies. The pure we relation is a face-to-face relationship “in which the partners are aware of each other and sympathetically participate in each other’s lives for however short a time” (Schutz, 1932/1967:164). The we relation encompasses the consciousness of the participants as well as the patterns of action and interaction that characterize face-to-face interaction. The we relation is characterized by a “thou orientation,” which “is the universal form in which the other is experienced ‘in person’” (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:62). In other words, we relations are highly personal and immediate.

The immediacy of interaction has two implications for social relations. First, in a we relation, unlike in a they relation, there are abundant indicators of the other’s subjective experience. Immediacy allows each actor to enter into the consciousness of the other. Second, when entering any social relation, an individual has only typical knowledge of the other. However, in the continuing process of a face-to-face interaction, typifications of the other are tested, revised, reenacted, and modified. That is, interaction with others necessarily modifies typologies.

Schutz not only offered a number of insights into we relations per se but also linked these relationships to cultural phenomena in the real world. For example, in we relations actors learn the typifications that allow them to survive socially. People not only learn recipes in we relations but use them there as well—trying them out, altering them when they prove ineffective or inappropriate.

Schutz was aware that there is considerable give-and-take among actors in we relations. People try out different courses of action on other people. They may quickly abandon those that elicit hostile reactions and continue to use those that are accepted. People also may find themselves in situations where recipes do not work at all, and they must create appropriate and workable sets of actions. In other words, in we relations people constantly adjust their actions with regard to those with whom they interact.

People also adjust their conceptions of others. They enter a given relationship with certain assumptions about what the other actors are thinking. In general, people assume that the thinking of others is of the same order as their own. Sometimes this is confirmed by what they find, but in other circumstances the facial expressions, the movements, the words, and the actions of others are inconsistent with people’s sense of what others are thinking. People then must revise their view of others’ thought processes and then adjust their responses on
the basis of this new image of what others are thinking. This is an indirect process because people cannot actually know what others are thinking. Thus, they may tentatively change their actions in the hope that this will elicit responses consistent with what they now think is going on in others’ minds. People may be forced to revise their conception of others’ thought processes and their actions a number of times before they are able to understand why others are acting in a particular way. It is even conceivable that in some instances people cannot make an adequate number of adjustments, with the result that they are likely to flee the particular interaction, completely confused. In such a case, they may seek more comfortable situations where familiar recipes can be applied.

Even within we relations in everyday life, most action is guided by recipes. People do not usually reflect on what they do or on what others do. However, when they encounter problems, inappropriate thoughts and actions, they must abandon their recipes and reflect on what is going on to create an appropriate response. This departure from recipes is psychologically costly, because people prefer to act and interact in accord with recipes.

Because of the freedom of actors within it, the umwelt is clearly difficult to deal with from a scientific point of view. In the umwelt, people and their actions are often not typified. However, people in the umwelt do employ typifications of other people and their courses of action. The result is that the social scientist can, albeit with some difficulty, construct typifications of the umwelt. In other words, rational models of this often nonrational world can be constructed, and these models can be used to understand life in the umwelt better. At the minimum, they can be used to assess differences between the rational models and the way people actually behave. In this approach, Schutz (1976:81) was using typifications in much the same way that Weber used his ideal types.

Before we turn to the mitwelt, it should be pointed out that it is in the umwelt that the typifications used in daily life (first-order constructs) are created. Thus, to Schutz the umwelt is the crucial source of first-order constructs (in contrast to the second-order constructs used in the social sciences), and it is an important, albeit difficult, arena of scientific study. Although it is difficult to analyze the umwelt scientifically, it is far easier to study the mitwelt in this manner. However, although it may be easier to study the mitwelt, such study is not likely to be as rewarding as a study of the umwelt because of the latter’s key role in the creation of typifications and its central role in the social lives of people in the life-world.

**Mitwelt and They Relations**

The mitwelt is that aspect of the social world in which people deal only with types of people or with larger social structures rather than with actual actors. People do fill these types and these structures, but in this world of “contemporaries,” these people are not experienced directly. Because actors are dealing with types rather than with actual people, their knowledge of people is not subject to constant revision on the basis of face-to-face interaction. This relatively constant knowledge of general types of subjective experience can be studied scientifically and can shed light on the general process by which people deal with the social world. A number of specific examples of the mitwelt are discussed later in this chapter.
Whereas in the *umwelt*, people coexist in the same time and space, in the *mitwelt*, spatial distances make it impossible to interact on a face-to-face basis. If the spatial situation changes and the people draw closer to each other, then face-to-face interaction becomes possible, but if it occurs, we have returned to the *umwelt*. People who were once in my *umwelt* may draw away from me and ultimately, because of spatial distances, become part of the *mitwelt*. Thus, there is a gradual transition from *umwelt* to *mitwelt* as people grow apart from one another. Here is the way Schutz described this gradual transition:

Now we are face-to-face, saying good-bye, shaking hands; now he is walking away. Now he calls back to me; now I see him waving to me; now he has disappeared around the corner. It is impossible to say at which precise moment the face-to-face situation ended and my partner became a mere contemporary of whom I have knowledge (he has, probably, arrived home) but no direct experience.

(Schutz, 1976:37)

Similarly, there are no clear dividing lines among the various levels of the *mitwelt*, discussed next.

The *mitwelt* is a stratified world with levels arranged by degree of anonymity. The more anonymous the level is, the more people’s relationships are amenable to scientific study. The following are some of the major levels within the *mitwelt*, beginning with the least anonymous:

1. Those whom actors encountered face-to-face in the past and could meet again. Actors are likely to have fairly current knowledge of them because they have been met before and could be met again. Although there is a relatively low level of anonymity here, such a relationship does not involve ongoing face-to-face interaction. If these people were to be met personally at a later date, this relationship would become part of the *umwelt* and no longer be part of the *mitwelt*.

2. Those once encountered not by us but by people whom we deal with. Because this level is based on secondhand knowledge of others, it involves more anonymity than the level of relationships with people we have encountered in the past. If we were ever to meet people at this level, the relationship would become part of the *umwelt*.

3. Those whom we are on the way to meet. As long as we have not yet met them, we relate to them as types, but when we actually meet them, the situation again becomes part of the *umwelt*.

4. Those whom we know not as concrete individuals but simply as positions and roles. For example, we know that there are people who sort our mail or process our checks, but although we have attitudes about them as types, we never encounter them personally.

5. Collectivities whose function we may know without knowing any of the individuals who exist within them. For example, we know about the Senate, but few people actually know any of the individuals in it, although we do have the possibility of meeting those people.

6. Collectivities that are so anonymous that we have little chance of ever encountering people in them. For most people, the Mafia would be an example of such a collectivity.

7. Objective structures of meaning that have been created by contemporaries with whom actors do not have and have not had face-to-face interaction. The rules of English grammar would be an example of
such a structure of meaning.

8. Physical artifacts that have been produced by a person we have not met and whom we are not likely to meet. For example, people would have a highly anonymous relationship with a museum painting.

As we move further into the *mitwelt* relationships, they become more impersonal and anonymous. People do not have face-to-face interaction with others and thus cannot know what goes on in others’ minds. Their knowledge is therefore restricted to “general types of subjective experience” (Schutz, 1932/1967:181).

*They relations*, which are found in the *mitwelt*, are characterized by interaction with impersonal contemporaries (e.g., the unseen postal employee who sorts our mail) rather than consociates (e.g., a personal friend). In they relations, the thoughts and actions of people are dominated by anonymous typifications.

In the “pure” they relation, the typical schemes of knowledge used to define other actors are not available for modification. Because we do not interact with actual people but with impersonal contemporaries, information that varies from our typifications is not provided to us. In other words, new experiences are not constituted in they relations. Cultural typifications determine action, and they cannot be altered by the thoughts and actions of actors in a they relationship. Thus, whereas we relations are subject to negotiation, they relations are not.

In spite of the distinction between we and they relations, the typifications used in they relations have their historical roots in we relations: “The first and originally objective solution of a problem was still largely dependent on the subjective relevance awareness of the individual” (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:225). However, these solutions ultimately become more typified and anonymous—in short, more and more a part of the cultural realm.
Consciousness, Meanings, and Motives

Whereas Husserl focused on consciousness, especially the universal structures of consciousness, Schutz turned away from consciousness and toward the direction of intersubjectivity, the life-world, and we and they relations. Thus, consciousness was not of focal concern to Schutz; rather, it constituted the point of departure for his science of intersubjectivity (Etzrodt, 2008).

Schutz believed that in the everyday world, as long as things are running smoothly in accord with recipes, reflective consciousness is relatively unimportant, and actors pay little attention to what is going on in their minds or in the minds of others. Similarly, Schutz (1932/1967:190) believed that in the science of phenomenological sociology, one could ignore individual consciousness. In fact, because Schutz found the mind impervious to scientific study, and because he wanted to focus on intersubjectivity, he admitted in his own work that he was going to abandon the traditional phenomenological focus on mental processes (1932/1967:97). We thus have the seemingly paradoxical situation of a sociologist who is the field's most famous phenomenologist abandoning the approach for which phenomenology is best known. However, the paradox is resolved when we realize that Schutz carried on the traditional phenomenological concern with subjectivity. Instead of focusing on individual subjectivity (as Husserl did), Schutz focused, as we have seen throughout this chapter, on intersubjectivity.

Despite Schutz's avowed focus on intersubjectivity, he offered many insights into consciousness. In fact, Schutz argued that the base of all his sociological concerns lay in the "processes of meaning establishment and understanding occurring within individuals, processes of interpretation of the behavior of other people and processes of self-interpretation" (1932/1967:11).

The philosophical basis of Schutz's image of the social world, albeit a basis that is, for him, not amenable to scientific study, is deep consciousness (durée), in which is found the process of meaning establishment, understanding, interpretation, and self-interpretation. A phenomenological sociology must be based on "the way meaning is constituted in the individual experience of the solitary Ego. In so doing we shall track meaning to its very point of origin in the inner time consciousness in the duration of the ego as it lives through its experience" (Schutz, 1932/1967:13). This is the domain that was of central concern to Schutz's philosophical predecessors, Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl. They were interested in philosophizing about what went on in the mind, but a central question to Schutz was how to turn this interest into a scientific sociological concern.

Schutz was drawn to the work of Max Weber, particularly that part of Weber's work concerned with social action, because it reflected, he thought, both an interest in consciousness and a concern for a scientific sociology. As we saw in Chapter 8, the interest in individual action was only a minor and secondary concern for Weber, who was more concerned with the impact of social structures on action than with the bases of action in consciousness. According to Prendergast, Schutz had "no apparent interest in Weber's theory of bureaucracy, sociology of religion, political sociology, or general economic history" (1986:15). Schutz, therefore, was concerned with only a small and peripheral portion of Weber's sociology. But even in that,
Weber was a less-than-satisfying model for Schutz but not for the reasons implied here. To Schutz, the problem with Weber’s work was that there were inadequacies in his conception of consciousness. Weber failed to distinguish among types of meanings, and he failed to distinguish meanings from motives. In clarifying what Weber failed to do, Schutz told us much about his own conception of consciousness.

Schutz argued that we must distinguish meanings from motives. In the process, he differentiated between two subtypes of both meanings and motives. Although he did not always succeed in keeping them neatly separated, for Schutz meanings concern how actors determine what aspects of the social world are important to them, whereas motives involve the reasons that actors do what they do. One type of meaning is the subjective meaning context. That is, through our own independent mental construction of reality, we define certain components of reality as meaningful. However, although this process is important in the everyday life-world, Schutz did not see it as amenable to scientific study, because it is too idiosyncratic.

Of concern to scientific sociology is the second type of meaning, the objective meaning context, the sets of meanings that exist in the culture as a whole and that are the shared possession of the collectivity of actors. In that these sets of meanings are shared rather than idiosyncratic, they are as accessible to sociologists as to anyone else. In that they have an objective existence, they can be studied scientifically by the sociologist, and they were one of Schutz’s main concerns. Schutz was critical of Weber for failing to differentiate between subjective and objective meaning and for failing to make it clear that objective meaning contexts can be most easily scrutinized in scientific sociology.

Schutz also differentiated between two types of motives—“in-order-to” and “because” motives. Both involve reasons for an individual’s actions but only because motives are accessible to both the person acting and the sociologist. In-order-to motives are the reasons that an actor undertakes certain actions; actions are undertaken to bring about some future objective or occurrence. They exist only when action is taking place. In-order-to motives are “subjective.” They are private and can be known by the actor but are inaccessible to others. In-order-to motives can be grasped only retrospectively by the actor, after the action is completed and the objective is (or is not) achieved. Sociology is little concerned with in-order-to motives because they are difficult to study scientifically. But sociology can study because motives, or retrospective glances at the past factors (e.g., personal background, individual psyche, environment) that caused individuals to behave as they did. Because motives are “objective”; they can be studied retrospectively using scientific methods. Because the actions have already occurred, the reasons for them are accessible to both the actor and the social scientist. However, neither other actors nor social scientists can know others’ motives, even because motives, fully. Both actors and scientists must be satisfied with being able to deal with typical motives.

In spite of their greater accessibility to the social scientist, because motives were of little more interest to Schutz than were in-order-to motives. They represented a Husserlian return to a concern for consciousness, but Schutz, as we have seen many times, was interested in moving on to the intersubjective world. However, Schutz believed that all social interaction is founded on a reciprocity of motives: “The actor’s in-order-to motives will become because-motives of his partner and vice versa” (1976:23).

Schutz embedded his most basic sociological concepts in consciousness. Action, for example, is “conduct self-
consciously projected by the actor” (Natanson, 1973:xxxiv), “conduct devised by the actor in advance” (Schutz, 1973:19). More explicitly, Natanson argued: “The crucial feature of action in every case is its purposive and projective character. Action has its source in the consciousness of the actor” (1973:xxxiv; italics added). Social action is “action which involves the attitudes and actions of others and is oriented to them in its course” (Schutz, 1976:13).

One other point should be made about Schutz’s thoughts on consciousness. Schutz saw within consciousness a fundamental human anxiety that lies at the base of his intersubjective world:

I know that I shall die and I fear to die. This basic experience we suggest calling the fundamental anxiety. It is the primordial anticipation from which all the others originate. From the fundamental anxiety spring the many interrelated systems of hopes and fears, of wants and satisfactions, of chances and risks which incite man within the natural attitude to attempt the mastery of the world; to overcome obstacles, to draft projects and to realize them.

(Schutz, 1973:228)
Criticisms and Contemporary Applications

In many ways, Schutzian theory is more difficult to interpret than the work of any other major theorist discussed thus far in this book. Schutz is probably the most single-mindedly abstract theorist whom we have encountered. Others have been much more deeply involved in the empirical world. Weber, for example, offered us his theory embedded in a great deal of historical detail. Marx moved back and forth between theoretical abstraction and the real-world evils of capitalism. Even Parsons, whom we encounter in the next chapter and who was a highly abstract thinker, touched base now and again with the real world. As close as Schutz (1976) ever came to the real world were his abstract essays on social types such as the stranger and the homecomer.

Related to this, some of Schutz’s contemporaries criticized him for developing a theory that failed to take an ethical stance (Barber, 2004). As we have seen throughout this book, some classical sociologists developed theories that advocate for social and political change (e.g., Marx, Du Bois, Gilman) and others have advocated for scientific neutrality (e.g., Weber, Durkheim). Like Weber, Schutz saw his work as merely describing ideal types but not drawing ethical conclusions (how should we act?) from those descriptions. In light of the atrocities committed during World War II, Schutz’s refusal to draw such conclusions struck some colleagues as troubling. They argued that theory should not only discover truth, but that it should recommend particular actions on the basis of that truth.

Concerns about the abstractness of Schutz’s theory aside, many sociologists have used Schutz’s ideas to great effect in understanding contemporary social life, especially its subjective side. Schutz, and phenomenologists more generally, has been particularly influential in fields such as nursing and medicine. These fields have relied upon phenomenology in two ways. First, they criticize the way that modern medicine increasingly treats people as objects rather than suffering human beings. To the medical gaze, people are problems to be solved rather than beings to be understood. Second, in addition to critique, phenomenological analysis provides tools that help to illuminate, in the most rigorous ways, the human side of disease, disability, and suffering (A. Frank, 1995/2013; Michalko, 1998).

Phenomenologist Thomas Eberle (2015), for example, provided a phenomenological analysis of his wife Verena’s experience of, and recovery from, a brain hemorrhage in 2006. As we have seen, Schutz argued that human reality is experienced in different modes: as everyday life, as dreams, as fantasy, and as scientific reflection, among others. These different kinds of reality are distinct from one another. In the course of everyday life, we know the difference between reality and dreams. Intuitively knowing these differences is crucial to the orderly conduct of social life. Yet, immediately after Verena suffered a brain aneurysm, “she did not experience her dreams, fantasies, and observations of actions in everyday life as different provinces of meaning, or as incompatible as Schutz proposed. She lived in an as-if reality where everything was mixed” (Eberle, 2015:571). Verena, in other words, could not distinguish between dream, fantasy, and what the rest of us call reality. As a result she had trouble interacting with family, friends, and the hospital nurses who continually tried to correct her. Eberle’s (2015:576) point is that “a phenomenological life-world analysis helps to explore another’s subjective life-world more profoundly.” In this case, we are encouraged to imagine what
life is like for the person who cannot organize their perception of reality in familiar ways. Phenomenology is unique in its ability to guide this kind of rich nuanced analysis of experience and for this reason is a crucial component of the contemporary sociological tool-kit.
Summary

Alfred Schutz took the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl, which was aimed inward toward an understanding of the transcendental ego, and turned it outward toward a concern for intersubjectivity, the life-world, and the social world.

The key to understanding Schutz's approach is a comprehension of his sense of science. Science was one of a number of worlds examined by Schutz—others included the worlds of dreams, fantasies, insanity, and, especially, the “paramount reality” of the everyday world. Scientists are not pragmatically involved in the everyday world of the subjects they study or, while they are doing science, their own everyday world. Instead, they are involved in the world of science and rely on its stock of knowledge rather than on the stock of knowledge associated with life in the everyday world.

While in the everyday world, people may behave sensibly or reasonably; only in the theoretical models of the social scientist can they behave in a fully rational manner. The rational models and (second-order) constructs of the social scientists (i.e., the “ideal types”) are based upon the first-order constructs that people must use to function in their daily lives. The social scientists’ analyses result in constructed ideal types of fully rational actors (puppets, or “homunculi”) and their courses of action. The construction of these ideal types must meet the demands of a rigorous science. It is this type of theorizing, said Schutz, that makes an objective rational science of subjectivity possible.

Implied in much of the preceding discussion is the centrality of typifications to both social scientists and people in the everyday world. Typifications are usually socially derived and socially approved and allow people to function on a daily basis. It is only in problematic situations that people (reluctantly) abandon their typifications (and recipes) and create new ways of dealing with the social world.

As mentioned earlier, Schutz was focally concerned with intersubjectivity, or the way in which people grasp the consciousness of others while they live within their own streams of consciousness. Much of Schutz’s work focuses on the life-world, or the world of everyday life. This is an intersubjective world in which people both create social reality and are constrained by the preexisting social and cultural structures created by their predecessors. Although much of the life-world is shared, there are also private (biographically articulated) aspects of that world.

There are four realms of the social world—the future (folgewelt); the past (vorwelt); the present world of consociates with whom we have face-to-face contact (umwelt); and the present world of contemporaries whom we know only as types (mitwelt). First-order constructs are created in the umwelt; the social scientists’ second-order constructs can be applied most easily to the mitwelt, although they are most importantly applied to the umwelt. Intimate we relations are found in the umwelt, and typified they relations characterize the mitwelt.

Although Schutz had turned away from consciousness, he did offer insights into it, especially in his thoughts on meaning and motives.
Notes

1. Whereas people use first-order constructs on a day-to-day basis, social scientists use second-order constructs (Schutz's “stranger,” e.g.) in their work.

2. And from group to group because the social stock of knowledge is stratified.

3. We can study what contemporaries expect of the future, but we cannot study the future itself.
17 Talcott Parsons
We come now to the last, and most contemporary, of the classical theorists to be discussed in this book, Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). It is appropriate to discuss his work in this book for two major reasons. For one thing, it was Parsons, in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), who brought European classical theory, especially the work of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, to the attention of American sociology (Camic, 1989). For another, Parsons created his own distinctive “grand” (or classical) theory. Parsons’s theory rivals in scope and grandeur the classical theories discussed in the preceding chapters of this book.

Parsons was undoubtedly the most important American sociological theorist (Lidz, 2011). His written work was widely cited and used by sociologists. Even more important, he shaped the structure of a large portion of American sociological theory, as well as sociology in general, from his position as professor at Harvard University. Many of the most important American theorists were his students, and they went on to endow their own departments, and their own students, with Parsonsian-style theory. Among the many theorists who worked with Parsons at Harvard were Robert Merton, Kingsley Davis, Robin Williams, Wilbert Moore, Marion Levy, and Neil Smelser.
Parsons’s Integrative Efforts

Of all the sociological theorists discussed in this book, Parsons was the most explicit in his intention to develop an integrated approach to sociological theory. There are a number of manifestations of this. First, Parsons founded the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University with the intention of unifying the various social sciences. Included in his integrative goal were such fields as clinical psychology, behavioral psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Second, in his own theorizing Parsons developed a clear sense of levels of social analysis, best exemplified in his notion of four action systems—behavioral organism, personality, social system, and cultural system. Finally, Parsons argued in one of his most important works, *The Social System*, that the integration of levels of social analysis is of central importance in the social world.
Talcott Parsons was born in 1902 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He came from a religious and intellectual background; his father was a Congregational minister, a professor, and ultimately president of a small college. Parsons received an undergraduate degree from Amherst College in 1924 and set out to do graduate work at the London School of Economics. In the next year, he moved on to Heidelberg, Germany. Max Weber had spent a large portion of his career at Heidelberg, and although he had died five years before Parsons arrived, Weber's influence survived and his widow, Marianne, continued to hold meetings in her home, meetings that Parsons attended. Parsons was greatly affected by Weber's work and ultimately wrote his doctoral thesis at Heidelberg, dealing, in part, with Weber's work.

Parsons became an instructor at Harvard in 1927, and although he switched departments several times, Parsons remained at Harvard until his death in 1979. His career progress was not rapid; he did not obtain a tenured position until 1939. Two years previously, he had published The Structure of Social Action, a book that not only introduced major sociological theorists such as Weber to large numbers of sociologists, but also laid the groundwork for Parsons's own developing theory.

After that, Parsons made rapid academic progress. He was made chairman of the Harvard sociology department in 1944, and two years later he set up and chaired the innovative Department of Social Relations, which included not only sociologists but a variety of other social scientists. By 1949, he had been elected president of the American Sociological Association. In the 1950s and into the 1960s, with the publication of such books as The Social System (1951), Parsons became the dominant figure in American sociology.

However, by the late 1960s, Parsons came under attack from the emerging radical wing of American sociology. Parsons was seen as being a political conservative, and his theory was considered highly conservative and little more than an elaborate categorization scheme. But in the 1980s, there was a resurgence in interest in Parsonsian theory, not only in the United States but around the world (J. Alexander, 1982–1983; Buxton, 1985; Camic, 1990; Holton and Turner, 1986; Sciulli and Gerstein, 1985). Robert Holton and Bryan Turner have perhaps gone the furthest, arguing that "Parsons' work … represents a more powerful contribution to sociological theory than that of Marx, Weber, Durkheim or any of their contemporary followers" (1986:13). Furthermore, Parsons's ideas
Influenced not only conservative thinkers but neo-Marxian theorists as well, especially Jürgen Habermas.

Upon Parsons's death, a number of his former students, themselves sociologists of considerable note, reflected on his theory, as well as on the man behind the theory (for a more recent, and highly personal, reminiscence, see Fox, 1997). In their musings, these sociologists offered some interesting insights into Parsons and his work. The few glimpses of Parsons reproduced here do not add up to a coherent picture, but they do offer some provocative glimpses of the man and his work.

Robert Merton was one of his students when Parsons was just beginning his teaching career at Harvard. Merton, who became a noted theorist in his own right, makes it clear that graduate students came to Harvard in those years to study not with Parsons but rather with Pitirim Sorokin, the senior member of the department, who was to become Parsons's archenemy (Zafirovski, 2001):

Of the very first generation of graduate students coming to Harvard … precisely none came to study with Talcott. They could scarcely have done so for the simplest of reasons: in 1931, he had no public identity whatever as a sociologist.

Although we students came to study with the renowned Sorokin, a subset of us stayed to work with the unknown Parsons.

(Merton, 1980:69)

Merton's reflections on Parsons's first course in theory are interesting, too, especially because the material provided the basis for one of the most influential theory books in the history of sociology:

Long before Talcott Parsons became one of the Grand Old Men of world sociology, he was for an early few of us its Grand Young Man. This began with his first course in theory…. [It] would provide him with the core of his masterwork, The Structure of Social Action which … did not appear in print until five years after its first oral publication.

(Merton, 1980:69–70)

Although all would not share Merton's positive evaluation of Parsons, they would acknowledge the following:

The death of Talcott Parsons marks the end of an era in sociology. When [a new era] does begin … it will surely be fortified by the great tradition of sociological thought which he has left to us.

(Merton, 1980:71)

This integration of a set of common value patterns with the internalized need-disposition structure of the constituent personalities is the core phenomenon of the dynamics of social systems. That the stability of any social system except the most evanescent interaction process is dependent on a degree of such integration may be said to be the fundamental dynamic theorem of sociology.

(Parsons, 1951:42; italics added)

Parsons made a similar point when he argued that the key issue to him was “the problem of theoretical formulation of the relations between the social system and the personality of the individual” (1970:1; italics added).

This integrative goal, which runs through a large portion of Parsons's work, is to be lauded and indeed has been applauded by some; however, others (e.g., J. Alexander, 1978; Menzies, 1977) came to see it as “muddled” and “confused.” These critics argued that Parsons began The Structure of Social Action as a micro-
oriented action theorist but that even before he finished that work, and progressively as the years passed, he moved more and more in the direction of a macro-oriented structural-functional theory. Some of the confusion in Parsons’s work resulted from his inability to give up older theoretical positions or to integrate them adequately with newer ones. As early as the preface to the second edition of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons spoke of his shift

from the analysis of the structure of social action as such to the structural-functional analysis of social systems. They are, of course, in the last analysis, systems of social action. But the structure of such systems is, in the newer version, treated not directly in action terms, but as “institutionalized patterns.”

(Parsons, 1949:D)

One view (Menzies, 1977) is that a basic problem of Parsons’s work stems from his never having completed the shift from action theory to structural functionalism, with the result that the two theories are interrelated in a muddled fashion throughout his work. It is not that the integration of action theory and structural functionalism is impossible or undesirable; rather, it is that Parsons never did reconcile them adequately. They often stand side by side in his work rather than being intertwined.
General Principles

A starting point for getting at the substance of Parsons's theoretical orientation is the general principles behind his theory building (Devereux, 1961). Parsons set as his goal the construction of an adequate general theory, a grand theory that was to be analytical, systematic, complete, and elegant. First, such a theory must, from his point of view, be an action theory in which “the central mechanism must always be some notion of actors orienting themselves to situations, with various sorts of goals, values, and normative standards, and behaving accordingly” (Devereux, 1961:19). Second, such a theory must be based on the principle of voluntarism, that is, an actor’s “choice among alternative values and courses of action must remain at least potentially free” (20). Third, such cultural phenomena as ideas, ideals, goals, and norms must be considered causally relevant factors. Fourth, Parsons adopted the idea of emergence—the notion that higher-order systems emerge out of lower-order systems. Such higher-order systems, he felt, must not be able to be inferred from, or explained in terms of, component parts. Finally, the emergent systems must never become wholly detached from their component parts. We will have numerous occasions in this chapter to question how well Parsons actually carried through on these principles in the course of his theoretical work. Although Parsons moved away from this base as his career progressed, the principles are those upon which he built his entire theory.

Philosophical and Theoretical Roots

The source of these ideas on theory can be found in Parsons's 1937 analysis of the roots of modern sociology. Here, and in other works, Parsons always gave the impression that he felt the whole of recent intellectual history was converging in him and his work. He analyzed and criticized utilitarianism and classical economics for dealing with isolated individuals, for assuming individual rationality, and for holding the view that social order came either from the pursuit of individual self-interest or from externally imposed sanctions. Parsons believed that we need to analyze nonrational as well as rational action and that we need to look toward institutionalized common values for the source of social order. He attacked positivism for its view of the world as a closed, deterministic system leaving no room for such critical notions as mind, consciousness, values, ends, and norms. Finally, Parsons lauded idealism for accepting the very ideas rejected by positivism, but he rejected the view that all the social world could be explained by such cultural factors.

The bulk of The Structure of Social Action is devoted to a discussion of Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, who developed ideas that were converging on what Parsons called the “voluntaristic theory of action.” Parsons's work on these four thinkers is largely a summary of their work, and there is little that is new in it. However, it has been criticized severely for being highly biased and deceptive. What is significant is that Parsons used their work to derive a number of ideas that proved crucial to him, including the nonrational, action, voluntarism, norms, and values. Basically, Parsons was saying that these thinkers had freed themselves from their theoretical roots (such as utilitarianism, positivism) and by so doing provided him with the tools he needed to construct a voluntaristic theory of action.

Action Theory
As a result of these influences and interpretations, Parsons’s early work is heavily oriented to action theory. Not too many years ago, a book on sociological theory would have devoted a great deal of attention to action theorists (MacIver, 1931, 1942; Parsons, 1937; Znaniecki, 1934). Today, however, interest in action theory has faded, although some more recent work (Coleman, 1986; Sciulli, 1986) has helped resuscitate it to some degree.

Action theory had its origin in Weber's work on social action (see Chapter 8). Although Weber embedded his work in assumptions on actors and action, his real interest was in the cultural and structural constraints on them. Instead of focusing on this aspect of Weber's work, action theory operated at the level of individual thought and action, as is clear from Roscoe Hinkle’s summary of the tenets of action theory:

1. Men’s social activities arise from their consciousnesses of themselves (as subjects) and of others and the external situations (as objects).
2. As subjects, men act to achieve their (subjective) intentions, purposes, aims, ends, objectives, or goals.
3. They use appropriate means, techniques, procedures, methods, and instruments.
4. Their courses of action are limited by unmodifiable conditions or circumstances.
5. Exercising will or judgment, they choose, assess, and evaluate what they will do, are doing, and have done.
6. Standards, rules, or moral principles are invoked in arriving at decisions.
7. Any study of social relationships requires the researcher to use subjective investigative techniques such as “verstehen,” imaginative or sympathetic reconstruction, or vicarious experience.

(Hinkle, 1963:706–707)

There is some evidence that such a micro-level action approach was anticipated by pre–World War I sociologists such as Lester Ward, Edward A. Ross, Franklin Giddings, Albion Small, and Charles H. Cooley, although their link to modern action theory is tenuous. Most of these early sociologists were preoccupied with the large-scale question of societal evolution. They discussed an active, creative view of the individual but tended to give society coercive power over the individual.

The exception to this tendency was Cooley. Although he accepted some of the tenets of his contemporaries and their interest in evolution, “what became ultimately significant in social life [were] subjective consciousness and personal feelings, sentiments, ideas, or ideals in terms of which men initiate and terminate their actions toward one another” (Hinkle, 1963:709).

Sociologists who worked between the end of World War I and the Depression exhibited a far greater connection with later action theory. Among the more important of these sociologists were Robert Park, Ellsworth Faris, W. I. Thomas, George Herbert Mead, and Talcott Parsons. Parsons was the major inheritor of the Weberian orientation, and his use of action theory in his early work gave that approach its widest audience.

Parsons’s Action Theory
Parsons was eager to differentiate action theory from behaviorism. In fact, he chose the term *action* because it had a different connotation from that of *behavior*. *Behavior* implies mechanical response to stimuli, whereas *action* implies an active, creative, “mental” process. As Parsons put it, “A theory which, like behaviorism, insists on treating human beings in terms which exclude his subjective aspect, is not a theory of action” (1937:77–78).

Three concepts lie at the heart of Parsons’s action theory—the unit act, voluntarism, and *verstehen*. The most basic phenomenon in Parsons’s action theory is what he called the *unit act*, which he defined in terms of four components. First, it implies the existence of an *actor*. Second, the unit act involves an *end*, or a future state toward which action is oriented. Third, the action takes place in a *situation* that involves two elements: things the actor cannot control (*conditions*) and those over which the actor can exert control (*means*). Finally, *norms* and *values* serve to shape the actor’s choice of means to ends (Parsons, 1937). Parsons said that there is “no such thing as action except as effort to conform to norms” (1937:76–77). Already in the unit act we see the integrative concerns that were to dominate Parsons throughout his life. Although he began with an interest in actors and their actions, he implied an interest in consciousness in terms of the voluntary choice of means to ends. But that choice is not free, which implies an interest on Parsons’s part in the social structures that constrain action. Cultural entities such as norms and values play a key role here, as they do throughout Parsons’s work. Intimately related to the unit act is Parsons’s concept of voluntarism. *Voluntarism* pertains to actors who are seen as making choices in social situations (Procter, 1978). This is not to say that the actors are totally free in those choices; voluntarism is not equivalent to “free will.” Nevertheless, the concept of voluntarism clearly implies a mind, consciousness, and individuals making decisions. Finally, there is the concept of *verstehen*, or the need to analyze action from the subjective perspective.

**The Turn Away from Action Theory**

In our view, although Parsons never abandoned the idea of individual choice constrained by external forces, he did abandon the focus on consciousness and action implied strongly in *The Structure of Social Action*. This is reflected in the degree to which Parsons backed off from three central concepts in his early work—the unit act, voluntarism, and *verstehen* (which he interpreted as a method largely oriented to the study of consciousness and action).

The unit act lay at the very core of the theoretical contribution of *The Structure of Social Action*, but it progressively disappeared as Parsons’s theories developed. In *The Social System* (1951) the unit act is cited only three times in a book that runs close to 600 pages. When it is cited, the impression is that Parsons simply used it to legitimate his earlier work and that it has no relevance to the project at hand. In *The Social System*, Parsons perfunctorily remarked that the unit act is still the basic unit, but

for most purposes of the more macroscopic analysis of social systems … it is convenient to make use of a higher order unit than the act, namely the status-role…. It is the structure of the _relations_ between the actors as involved in the interactive process which is essentially the structure of the social system…. It is the participation of an actor in a patterned interactive relationship which is for many purposes the most
The unit act and the status-role are very different phenomena, as far as we are concerned. Whereas the unit act refers to actor and action, the status-role refers to position within a structure of interaction. In his later work, Parsons developed the concept of need-disposition as the most significant unit at the personality level; value orientations occupy the same position in the cultural system. As we see later, need-dispositions are biological needs shaped by external forces, and value orientations are internalized cultural standards. The issue here is whether these three new concepts have “emerged” from the unit act or whether they are entirely new concepts. Only the value orientation is traceable directly to the unit act and Parsons’s thinking in 1937. Status-role and need-disposition are entirely new, arising out of Parsons’s later thought. In his preface to the second edition of *The Structure of Social Action* (1949), Parsons admitted that in the 1937 edition he did not include two critical influences—those of Sigmund Freud on the psychological side and those of anthropologists such as Franz Boas. It is from these sources that Parsons’s concepts of need-disposition and status-role undoubtedly came. Clearly, we do not need the unit act to understand the three later concepts. Furthermore, Parsons did not need (or use) the unit act to analyze the social, cultural, and personality systems. As he became, in turn, a structural functionalist, a functionalist, and an evolutionist, the unit act became increasingly extraneous. In his basic work on evolution, *Societies* (1966), the unit act disappears completely.

Finally, there is the disappearance of *verstehen* from Parsons’s theory. As Parsons put it: “Contrary to the point of view held by the author in *The Structure of Social Action*, it now appears that this postulate [the subjective point of view] is not essential to the frame of reference of action in its most elementary form” (1951:543). Thus *verstehen* followed the unit act and voluntarism into Parsonsian oblivion. In fact, the subjective perspective had to go when Parsons deserted the unit act and voluntarism. It was because he was looking at a voluntaristic unit act that Parsons needed a subjective methodology. According to John Finley Scott, it was the influence of behaviorism that helped to move Parsons away from *verstehen*. Finally, a sociologist need not use *verstehen* to study need-dispositions, status-roles, or value orientations, concepts that characterized the next phase of Parsons’s work (see the next section).

**Need-Dispositions**

In work published in the early 1950s, Parsons’s interest in the individual level took a new turn. Parsons moved from the unit act, voluntarism, and *verstehen* to need-dispositions and the orientations of actors to situations. There is a concern with consciousness here, albeit a constrained one, one devoid of virtually all creativity. Actors are depicted as being driven by need-dispositions to seek the optimization of gratification; that is, they are impelled by innate needs that are shaped and molded by external forces into dispositions. Within this context, Parsons dealt with the motivational and value orientations of actors.

**Motivational Orientations**

Actors use the framework of motivational orientations to analyze social phenomena that are of interest to
them. Of major concern is the degree to which the phenomena represent actual or potential satisfaction of their need-dispositions. This process involves three dimensions. First, actors must analyze the situation cognitively. That is, they must do the following:

1. Locate social phenomena (individuals, collectivities, physical culture objects).
2. Differentiate them from other social phenomena.
3. Relate them to general classes of objects.
4. Determine the social phenomenon’s properties.
5. Determine the social phenomenon’s actual or potential functions.

Simultaneously, the actors must assess the cathectic significance of the social phenomenon: they must decide how much affect, or emotion, to invest in each phenomenon they perceive. That determination is influenced by the degree to which a phenomenon is likely to gratify or deprive actors in terms of their need-dispositions. Then actors go through an evaluative process in which they determine how to allocate their energies in order to optimize gratification and minimize deprivation.

This discussion of motivational orientation relates to consciousness to some extent. However, it is not the conscious process but the norms and values that shape this process that were of prime significance to Parsons.

**Value Orientations**

It is in the context of norms and values that Parsons dealt with value orientations, or the cultural standards for judging solutions to each of the three motivational issues discussed in the previous section. Through the socialization process, actors internalize these standards, which become aspects of the actors’ orientations, and commit them to the observance of certain norms, standards, and criteria of selection whenever they must make choices. Parsons described three value orientations that parallel the three modes of motivational orientation.

First, the actors acquire a set of cognitive standards. Among other things, these standards help the actors decide whether the data they are receiving are important, whether their observations are useful, and what the relative importance is of various situations and problems. In other words, cognitive standards handle informational problems associated with a motivational decision. Then there are appreciative standards that allow actors to assess the appropriateness and the consistency of the amount of cathectic energy they have invested in various social phenomena. These are the social rules that help us determine whether a given social entity will satisfy our need-dispositions. Finally, there are moral standards that permit actors to assess the consequences of their actions for the integrity of and relationship between the personality and social systems.

Overall, the existence of these three sets of standards in Parsons’s work, and the sense that they guide (to a large extent even determine) actors’ choices, leads us to doubt that Parsons retained very much of a sense of voluntarism.

**Types of Action**

Parsons used the three modes of motivational and value orientation to develop four basic types of action.
**Intellectual action** involves cognitive motivational interests and cognitive value standards; **expressive action** combines cathetic interests and appreciative standards; and **moral action** involves evaluative interests and moral standards. **Instrumental action**, the fourth type, is more complex. It involves future goals determined by cathetic interests and appreciative standards and means to those goals determined by cognitive standards.

Although Parsons was willing to offer us a static typology of action, there is in fact very little sense of dynamic individual action in his work. He based his model of a social system on the interaction of ego and alter ego, but he had very little to say about this, using it only as a base on which to build his large-scale sense of the social system. This lack of action in Parson's model, even when he was supposedly an action theorist, led William F. Whyte to argue that “in the world of Talcott Parsons, actors are constantly orienting themselves to situations and very rarely, if ever, acting” (1961:255).

**Pattern Variables**

Returning to Parsons's work on action and consciousness, we encounter the famous, or infamous, pattern variables, which reflect Parsons's overwhelming penchant for parallelisms and conceptual neatness. At the most basic level, the pattern variables are a conceptual set of five dichotomous choices of action that actors must make in every situation. At this level they are tools for analyzing conscious processes. The pattern variables are universal choices an actor must make before a situation will have determinate meaning; they address the fundamental problem of orienting oneself to a situation (Parsons, 1951:60). The pattern variables are:

1. **Affectivity–affective neutrality:** The attitudinal problem of how we feel toward a social phenomenon—how much emotion, affect, to invest in it. For example, should physicians develop emotional ties to patients, or should physicians keep patients at a distance?
2. **Specificity–diffuseness:** The attitudinal problem of whether to orient ourselves to part or all of the social phenomena. Should patients accept advice from physicians on all kinds of problems or only on those within the physicians’ area of expertise?
3. **Universalism–particularism:** The problem of how to categorize social phenomena. Are we to judge them in terms of general standards that apply universally to all such entities, or are we to use more specific, more emotional standards in such judgments? For example, we are likely to judge potential physicians with universal standards, but we are likely to assess our own children with more particular standards.
4. **Ascription–achievement:** The problem of whether we characterize social phenomena by what they are endowed with or by what they acquire. Are people born with the ability to become physicians, or are such abilities learned?
5. **Self–collectivity:** The dilemma of whether we should pursue our own private interests or those shared with other members of the collectivity. Is the physicians’ desire to earn a good living incompatible with their stated goal of helping humankind?

Parsons went on to use the pattern variables to analyze other aspects of his theoretical system. They can be used to differentiate habits of choice within the personality system, to examine the different role expectations within the social system, and to differentiate among the various normative patterns in the cultural system.
This tendency to use the same conceptual scheme at different levels of social analysis gives Parsons’s work an orderly feel, but it also created problems for him. There is no obvious reason why the same concepts should fit such diverse levels. As Alfred Baldwin said: “The problem of integrating motives within the person bears only a slight resemblance to that of integrating people in society” (1961:185). In general, there is no persuasive reason to believe that all systems, no matter what their level of complexity, have the same set of dilemmas.

**AGIL**

As has been pointed out previously in this chapter, over the course of his career Parsons moved from action theory to structural functionalism. We present some of Parsons’s thoughts on structures and systems shortly, but first we discuss some of his ideas on functionalism. A *function* is “a complex of activities directed towards meeting a need or needs of the system” (Rocher, 1975:40). Using this definition, Parsons believed that there are four functional imperatives that are necessary for (characteristic of) all systems—adaptation (A), goal attainment (G), integration (I), and latency (L). Together, these four functional imperatives are known as the AGIL scheme. To survive, a system must perform these four functions:

1. **Adaptation**: A system must cope with external situational exigencies. It must adapt to its environment and adapt the environment to its needs.
2. **Goal attainment**: A system must define and achieve its primary goals.
3. **Integration**: A system must regulate the interrelationship of its component parts. It also must manage the relationship among the other three functional imperatives (A, G, L).
4. **Latency (pattern maintenance)**: A system must furnish, maintain, and renew both the motivation of individuals and the cultural patterns that create and sustain the motivation.

As with the pattern variables, Parsons designed the AGIL scheme to be used at all levels in his theoretical system (for one example, see Paulsen and Feldman, 1995). As Chandler Morse noted:

> The four functional imperatives, or problems, operate at both a micro-analytic and a macro-analytic level in the Parsonsian model. At the micro-level they purport to specify the phases through which individual actors in a small action system and the action system as a whole must progress during an action cycle. At the macro-level the imperatives provide a means of (a) allocating roles analytically among four functional sub-systems of any given system, and of (b) sorting out the input-output flows among those sub-systems.

(Morse, 1961:116)

In the discussion that follows on the four action systems, we will illustrate how Parsons uses the AGIL system; later, we show how he applies it to society.

At their most general level, the four functional imperatives are linked to the four action systems (discussed in detail shortly). The *behavioral organism* is the action system that handles the adaptation function by adjusting to and transforming the external world. The *personality system* performs the goal-attainment function by defining system goals and mobilizing resources to attain them. The *social system* copes with the integration
function by controlling its component parts. Finally, the cultural system performs the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action. Figure 17.1 summarizes the structure of the action system in terms of the AGIL schema.

**Figure 17.1 Structure of the General Action System**

![Structure of the General Action System Diagram](image)


**Consistency in Parsonsian Theory: Integration and Order**

We have been stressing some of the changes in Parsonsian theory but have, if anything, understated them, because Parsonsian theory takes many other twists and turns. For example, in his later work, Parsons came to think of his approach not so much as action, structural functional, or functional, but as cybernetic. His concern was with communication among action systems as well as control of lower-order systems by higher-order ones. In spite of all these dramatic changes, there were consistent elements in Parsonsian theory. Although he came to admit certain shifts, Parsons emphasized his “essential continuity over the forty-year period since *The Structure of Social Action*” (1977a:2).

One of Parsons's most important concerns from the beginning was the question of order in society (Burger, 1977; Chen, 2004; R. Münch, 2005). Given a modern, complex society, the question arises of how a “war of all against all,” rampant social conflict, is avoided. Throughout his career, Parsons argued that power is not the force that prevents such social warfare. In his view, power is not a sound means of maintaining order in society. Although exercises of power may work in the short run, in the long run they are only likely to bring about more disorder. The use of power evokes negative reactions that lead to further disintegration in society. Furthermore, constant vigilance is required for the exercise of power to work. It is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive to maintain order in society on the basis of power. In short, power is an inadequate and inefficient method of maintaining order in society. This antipower position was a consistent theme of Parsons from his earliest works.
Another consistent idea of Parsons was his alternative solution to the problem of order. To Parsons, the ideal way for a society to maintain order is to develop a cultural system that emphasizes cooperation and then have that set of ideas internalized in the actors through socialization. This idea relates to Parsons's fundamental theorem, which involves the integration of “common value patterns” (culture) and “need-dispositions” (personality). Put somewhat crudely, order in society is best maintained when people are put in the position of constraining themselves. Because people carry common value patterns around in their heads, they are able to determine for themselves if they are out of line and are able to realign themselves with the cultural value system. Ideally, no external power source is needed to maintain order in society; the society that governs least governs best. Of course, in some instances power is necessary, but these should be few and far between. If the authorities are forced to use power too often, then a society is in deep trouble, perhaps even in danger of disintegration.

This issue of order, power, and integration was an essential theme of Parsons throughout his career. At the end of *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Parsons considered the solution of the power question to be in value integration. The integration of values and need-dispositions lies at the heart of *The Social System* (1951) and is central to many of Parsons's books and essays after that time. For example, in a well-known essay on organizations, Parsons argued that his “main point of reference for analyzing the [organization] … is its value pattern” (1960:20). Although he did discuss power, his primary interest was in cultural dimensions that provide organizational integration. Thus, whereas most people conceive of organizations as arenas of power and power struggles, Parsons emphasized the values that held organizations together. This kind of thinking over the years earned Parsons the title of “consensus” theorist. We return to this theme in the next section.
The Action System

We are now ready to discuss the overall shape of Parsons’s action system. Figure 17.2 is an outline of the major levels of Parsons’s schema.

Figure 17.2 Parsons’s Action Schema

It is obvious that Parsons had a clear notion of “levels” of social analysis as well as their interrelationship. The hierarchical arrangement is clear, and the levels are integrated in Parsons’s system in two ways. First, each of the lower levels provides the conditions, the energy, needed for the higher levels. Second, the higher levels control those below them in the hierarchy.

In terms of the environments of the action system, the lowest level, the physical and organic environment, involves the nonsymbolic aspects of the human body, its anatomy and physiology. The highest level, ultimate reality, has, as Jackson Toby suggested, “a metaphysical flavor,” but Toby also argued that Parsons “is not referring to the supernatural so much as to the universal tendency for societies to address symbolically the uncertainties, concerns, and tragedies of human existence that challenge the meaningfulness of social organization” (1977:3).

The heart of Parsons’s work is found in his four action systems. In discussing these systems and their interrelationships, Parsons moved away from his earlier action theory and in the direction of structural functionalism (this move is also clear in the earlier discussion of AGIL). In the assumptions that Parsons made regarding his action systems, we encounter again the problem of order that was his overwhelming concern and that has become a major source of criticism of his work (Schwanenberg, 1971). The Hobbesian
problem of order—what prevents a social war of all against all—was not answered to Parsons’s (1937) satisfaction by the earlier philosophers. Parsons found his answer to the problem of order in structural functionalism, which operates in his view with the following set of assumptions:

1. Systems have the property of order and interdependence of parts.
2. Systems tend toward self-maintaining order, or equilibrium.
3. The system may be static or involved in an ordered process of change.
4. The nature of one part of the system has an impact on the form that the other parts can take.
5. Systems maintain boundaries with their environments.
6. Allocation and integration are two fundamental processes necessary for a given state of equilibrium of a system.
7. Systems tend toward self-maintenance involving the maintenance of boundaries and of the relationships of parts to the whole, control of environmental variations, and control of tendencies to change the system from within.

These assumptions led Parsons to make the analysis of the ordered structure of society his first priority. In so doing, he did little with the issue of social change, at least until later in his career:

We feel that it is uneconomical to describe changes in systems of variables before the variables themselves have been isolated and described; therefore, we have chosen to begin by studying particular combinations of variables and to move toward description of how these combinations change only when a firm foundation for such has been laid.

(Parsons and Shils, 1951:6)

Parsons was so heavily criticized for his static orientation that he devoted more and more attention to change; in fact, he eventually focused on the evolution of societies. However, in the view of most observers, even his work on social change tended to be highly static and structured.

In reading about the four action systems, the reader should keep in mind that they do not exist in the real world but are, rather, analytical tools for analyzing the real world.

Social System

Parsons’s conception of the social system begins at the micro level with interaction between ego and alter ego, defined as the most elementary form of the social system. He spent little time analyzing this level, although he did argue that features of this interaction system are present in the more complex forms taken by the social system. Parsons defined a social system thus:

A social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the
“optimization of gratification” and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols.

(Parsons, 1951:5–6)

This definition seeks to define a social system in terms of many of the key concepts in Parsons’s work—actors, interaction, environment, optimization of gratification, and culture.

Despite his commitment to viewing the social system as a system of interaction, Parsons did not take interaction as his fundamental unit in the study of the social system. Rather, he used the status-role complex as the basic unit of the system. As mentioned earlier, this is neither an aspect of actors nor an aspect of interaction, but rather a structural component of the social system. Status refers to a structural position within the social system, and role is what the actor does in such a position, seen in the context of its functional significance for the larger system. The actor is viewed not in terms of thoughts and actions, but instead (at least in terms of position in the social system) as nothing more than a bundle of statuses and roles.

In his analysis of the social system, Parsons was interested primarily in its structural components. In addition to a concern with the status-role, Parsons (1966:11) was interested in such large-scale components of social systems as collectivities, norms, and values. In his analysis of the social system, however, Parsons was not simply a structuralist but also a functionalist. He thus delineated a number of the functional prerequisites of a social system. First, social systems must be structured so that they operate compatibly with other systems. Second, to survive, the social system must have the requisite support from other systems. Third, the system must meet a significant proportion of the needs of its actors. Fourth, the system must elicit adequate participation from its members. Fifth, it must have at least a minimum of control over potentially disruptive behavior. Sixth, if conflict becomes sufficiently disruptive, it must be controlled. Finally, a social system requires a language in order to survive.

It is clear in Parsons's discussion of the functional prerequisites of the social system that his focus was large-scale systems and their relationship to one another (societal functionalism). Even when he talked about actors, it was from the point of view of the system. Also, the discussion reflects Parsons's concern with the maintenance of order within the social system.

**Actors and the Social System**

However, Parsons did not completely ignore the issue of the relationship between actors and social structures in his discussion of the social system. In fact, as we saw earlier, he called the integration of value patterns and need-dispositions “the fundamental dynamic theorem of sociology” (Parsons, 1951:42). Given his central concern with the social system, of key importance in this integration are the processes of internalization and socialization. That is, Parsons was interested in the ways that the norms and values of a system are transferred to the actors within the system. In a successful socialization process, these norms and values are internalized; that is, they become part of the actors’ “consciences.” As a result, in pursuing their own interests, the actors are in fact serving the interests of the system as a whole. As Parsons put it, “The combination of value-orientation
patterns which is acquired [by the actor in socialization] must in a very important degree be a function of the fundamental role structure and dominant values of the social system” (1951:227).

In general, Parsons assumed that actors usually are passive recipients in the socialization process. Children learn not only how to act but also the norms and values, the morality, of society. Socialization is conceptualized as a conservative process in which need-dispositions (which are themselves largely molded by society) bind children to the social system, and it provides the means by which the need-dispositions can be satisfied. There is little or no room for creativity; the need for gratification ties children to the system as it exists. Parsons viewed socialization as a lifelong experience. Because the norms and values inculcated in childhood tend to be very general, they do not prepare children for the various specific situations that they encounter in adulthood. Thus, socialization must be supplemented throughout the life cycle with a series of more specific socializing experiences. Despite this need later in life, the norms and values learned in childhood tend to be stable and, with a little gentle reinforcement, tend to remain in force throughout life.

Despite the conformity induced by lifelong socialization, there is a wide range of individual variation in the system. The question is: Why is this normally not a major problem for the social system, given its need for order? For one thing, a number of social control mechanisms can be employed to induce conformity. However, as far as Parsons was concerned, social control is strictly a second line of defense. A system runs best when social control is used only sparingly. For another thing, the system must be able to tolerate some variation, some deviance. A flexible social system is stronger than a brittle one that accepts no deviation. Finally, the social system should provide a wide range of role opportunities that allow different personalities to express themselves without threatening the integrity of the system.

Socialization and social control are the main mechanisms that allow the social system to maintain its equilibrium. Modest amounts of individuality and deviance are accommodated, but more extreme forms must be met by reequilibrating mechanisms. Thus, social order is built into the structure of Parsons’s social system:

Without deliberate planning on anyone’s part there have developed in our type of social system, and correspondingly in others, mechanisms which, within limits, are capable of forestalling and reversing the deep-lying tendencies for deviance to get into the vicious circle phase which puts it beyond the control of ordinary approval-disapproval and reward-punishment sanctions.

(Parsons, 1951:319)

Again, Parsons’s main interest was the system as a whole rather than the actor in the system—how the system controls the actor, not how the actor creates and maintains the system. This reflects Parsons’s commitment on this issue to a structural-functional orientation.

Society

Although the idea of a social system encompasses all types of collectivities, one specific and particularly important social system is society, “a relatively self-sufficient collectivity the members of which are able to
satisfy all their individual and collective needs and to live entirely within its framework” (Rocher, 1975:60).4 As a structural functionalist, Parsons distinguished among four structures, or subsystems, in society in terms of the functions (AGIL) they perform (see Figure 17.3). The economy is the subsystem that performs the function for society of adapting to the environment through labor, production, and allocation (Moss and Savchenko, 2006). Through such work, the economy adapts the environment to society’s needs, and it helps society adapt to these external realities. The polity (or political system) performs the function of goal attainment by pursuing societal objectives and mobilizing actors and resources to that end. The fiduciary system (e.g., in the schools, the family) handles the latency function by transmitting culture (norms and values) to actors and allowing it to be internalized by them. Finally, the integration function is performed by the societal community (e.g., the law), which coordinates the various components of society (Parsons and Platt, 1973).

Figure 17.3 Society, Its Subsystems, and the Functional Imperatives

As important as the structures of the social system were to Parsons, the cultural system was more important. In fact, as we saw earlier, the cultural system stood at the top of Parsons’s action system,5 and Parsons (1966) labeled himself a “cultural determinist.”

Cultural System

Parsons conceived of culture as the major force binding the various elements of the social world, or, in his terms, the action system. Culture mediates interaction among actors and integrates the personality and the social systems. Culture has the peculiar capacity to become, at least in part, a component of the other systems. Thus, in the social system, culture is embodied in norms and values, and in the personality system, it is internalized by the actor. But the cultural system is not simply a part of other systems; it also has a separate
existence in the form of the social stock of knowledge, symbols, and ideas. These aspects of the cultural system are available to the social and personality systems, but they do not become part of them (Morse, 1961:105; Parsons and Shils, 1951:6).

Parsons defined the cultural system, as he did his other systems, in terms of its relationship to the other action systems. Thus, *culture* is seen as a patterned, ordered system of symbols that are objects of orientation to actors, internalized aspects of the personality system, and institutionalized patterns (Parsons, 1990) in the social system. Because it is largely symbolic and subjective, culture is readily transmitted from one system to another. Culture can move from one social system to another through diffusion and from one personality system to another through learning and socialization. However, the symbolic (subjective) character of culture also gives it another characteristic, the ability to control Parsons’s other action systems. This is one of the reasons that Parsons came to view himself as a cultural determinist.

Again establishing parallelism and orderliness in his thinking, Parsons argued that the cultural system has three components that parallel the three modes of motivational orientation discussed earlier. The *cognitive* motivational orientation is paralleled in culture by systems of beliefs and idea systems that represent guidelines to the solution of motivational problems. The *cathectic* motivational orientation has its parallel in culture in systems of expressive symbols, means of expressing a cathectic attachment to a social object. Finally, the *evaluative* motivational orientation is paralleled by similar cultural guidelines—systems of value orientations. (Each component can be subdivided in precisely the same way. Thus, for example, as discussed earlier, the system of value orientations can be broken down into cognitive, appreciative, and moral standards.) Parsons came to the conclusion that the moral standards are “the superordinate integrative techniques of a system of action” (Parsons and Shils, 1951:170). This conclusion reflects the crucial idea in Parsons’s theory—that the cultural system is preeminent. But if culture is preeminent, Parsons’s integrative work is questionable, for any kind of determinism is suspect from the point of view of an integrated sociology. (For a more integrated conception of Parsons’s work, see Camic, 1990.) This problem is exacerbated when we look at the personality system and see how weakly it is developed in Parsons’s work.

**Personality System**

The personality system is controlled not only by the cultural system but also by the social system. Parsons’s early conception of consciousness and action, in terms of his work on the unit act, voluntarism, and so forth, was reviewed earlier and found wanting. Parsons seemed to be aware of the charge that he had given up his earlier emphasis on voluntarism, and he sought to salvage his position by according some independence to the personality system:

My view will be that, while the main content of the structure of the personality is derived from social systems and culture through socialization, the personality becomes an independent system through its relations to its own organism and through the uniqueness of its own life experience; it is not a mere epiphenomenon.
We get the feeling here that Parsons is protesting too much. If the personality system is not an epiphenomenon, it is certainly reduced to secondary or dependent status in his theoretical system.

The personality is defined as the organized system of orientation and motivation of action of the individual actor. The basic component of the personality is the need-disposition, a concept we discussed earlier but which now needs further explication. Parsons and Edward Shils defined need-dispositions as the “most significant units of motivation of action” (1951:113). They differentiated need-dispositions from drives, which are innate tendencies—“physiological energy that makes action possible” (Parsons and Shils, 1951:111). In other words, drives are better seen as part of the biological organism. Need-dispositions are then defined as “these same tendencies when they are not innate but acquired through the process of action itself” (Parsons and Shils, 1951:111). In other words, need-dispositions are drives that are shaped by the social setting.

Need-dispositions impel actors to accept or reject objects presented in the environment or to seek out new objects if the ones that are available do not adequately satisfy need-dispositions. Parsons differentiated among three basic types of need-dispositions. The first type impels actors to seek love, approval, and so forth from their social relationships. The second type includes internalized values that lead actors to observe various cultural standards. Finally, there are the role expectations that lead actors to give and get appropriate responses.

This gives a very passive image of actors. They seem to be either impelled by drives, dominated by the culture, or, more usually, shaped by a combination of drives and culture (i.e., by need-dispositions). A passive personality system is clearly a weak link in an integrated theory, and Parsons seemed to be aware of it. On various occasions, he tried to endow the personality with some creativity. For example, he said: “We do not mean … to imply that a person’s values are entirely ‘internalized culture’ or mere adherence to rules and laws. The person makes creative modifications as he internalizes culture; but the novel aspect is not the culture aspect” (Parsons and Shils, 1951:72). Despite claims such as these, the dominant impression that emerges from Parsons’s work is one of a passive personality system.

Parsons’s emphasis on need-dispositions creates other problems. Because it leaves out so many other important aspects of personality, his system becomes a largely impoverished one. Alfred Baldwin, a psychologist, makes precisely this point:

It seems fair to say that Parsons fails in his theory to provide the personality with a reasonable set of properties or mechanisms aside from need-dispositions, and gets himself into trouble by not endowing the personality with enough characteristics and enough different kinds of mechanisms for it to be able to function.

(A. Baldwin, 1961:186)
Baldwin makes another telling point about Parsons’s personality system, arguing that even when Parsons analyzed the personality system, he was really not focally interested in it: “Even when he is writing chapters on personality structure, Parsons spends many more pages talking about social systems than he does about personality” (1961:180). This is reflected in the various ways that Parsons linked the personality to the social system. First, actors must learn to see themselves in a way that fits with the place they occupy in society (Parsons and Shils, 1951:147). Second, role expectations are attached to each of the roles occupied by individual actors. Then there is the learning of self-discipline, internalization of value orientations, identification, and so forth. All these forces point toward the integration of the personality system with the social system, which Parsons emphasized. However, he also pointed out the possible malintegration, which is a problem for the system that needs to be overcome.

Another aspect of Parsons’s work—his interest in internalization as the personality system’s side of the socialization process—reflects the passivity of the personality system. Parsons (1970:2) derived this interest from Durkheim’s work on internalization, as well as from Freud’s work, primarily that on the superego. In emphasizing internalization and the superego, Parsons again manifested his conception of the personality system as passive and externally controlled.

Although Parsons was willing to talk about the subjective aspects of personality in his early work, he progressively abandoned that perspective. In so doing, he limited his possible insights into the personality system. Parsons at one point stated clearly that he was shifting his attention away from the internal meanings that the actions of people may have: “The organization of observational data in terms of the theory of action is quite possible and fruitful in modified behavioristic terms, and such formulation avoids many of the difficult questions of introspection or empathy” (Parsons and Shils, 1951:64).

**Behavioral Organism**

Though he included the behavioral organism as one of the four action systems, Parsons had very little to say about it. It is included because it is the source of energy for the rest of the systems. Although it is based on genetic constitution, its organization is affected by the processes of conditioning and learning that occur during the individual’s life. The behavioral organism is clearly a residual system in Parsons’s work, but at the minimum, Parsons is to be lauded for including it as a part of his sociology, if for no other reason than that he anticipated the interest in sociobiology and the sociology of the body (B. Turner, 1985) among at least a few sociologists.
Change and Dynamism in Parsonsian Theory

Evolutionary Theory

Parsons’s work with conceptual tools such as the pattern variables, the functional imperatives, and the four action systems led to the accusation that he offered a structural theory that was unable to deal with social change. Parsons had long been sensitive to this charge, arguing that although a study of change was necessary, it must be preceded by a study of structure. But by the 1960s he could resist the charges no longer and made another major shift in his work, this time to the study of social change, particularly the study of social evolution. By Parsons’s (1977b:50) own testimony, that interest was first stimulated by a seminar on social evolution held in 1963.

Parsons’s (1966) general orientation to the study of social change was shaped by biology. To deal with this process, Parsons developed what he called “a paradigm of evolutionary change.”

The first component of that paradigm is the process of differentiation. Parsons assumed that any society is composed of a series of subsystems that differ in terms of both their structure and their functional significance for the larger society. As society evolves, new subsystems are differentiated. This is not enough, however; they also must be more adaptive than earlier subsystems. Thus, the essential aspect of Parsons’s evolutionary paradigm was the idea of adaptive upgrading. Parsons described this process:

If differentiation is to yield a balanced, more evolved system, each newly differentiated substructure … must have increased adaptive capacity for performing its primary function, as compared to the performance of that function in the previous, more diffuse structure…. We may call this process the adaptive upgrading aspect of the evolutionary change cycle.

(Parsons, 1966:22)

This is a highly positive model of social change (although Parsons certainly had a sense of its darker side). It assumes that as society evolves, it grows generally better able to cope with its problems. In contrast, in Marxian theory, social change leads to the eventual destruction of capitalist society. For this reason, among others, Parsons is often thought of as a very conservative sociological theorist. In addition, although he did deal with change, he tended to focus on the positive aspects of social change in the modern world rather than on modernity’s negative side.

Next, Parsons argued that the process of differentiation leads to a new set of problems of integration for society. As subsystems proliferate, the society is confronted with new problems in coordinating the operations of these units.

A society undergoing evolution must move from a system of ascription to one of achievement. A wider array of skills and abilities is needed to handle the more diffuse subsystems. The generalized abilities of people must
be freed from their ascriptive bonds so that they can be utilized by society. Most generally, this means that groups formerly excluded from contributing to the system must be freed for inclusion as full members of the society.

Finally, the value system of the society as a whole must undergo change as social structures and functions grow increasingly differentiated. However, because the new system is more diverse, it is harder for the value system to encompass it. Thus a more differentiated society requires a value system that is “couched at a higher level of generality in order to legitimize the wider variety of goals and functions of its subunits” (Parsons, 1966:23). However, this process of generalization of values often does not proceed smoothly as it meets resistance from groups committed to their own narrow value systems.

Evolution proceeds through a variety of cycles, but no general process affects all societies equally. Some societies may foster evolution, whereas others may “be so beset with internal conflicts or other handicaps” that they impede the process of evolution, or they may even “deteriorate” (Parsons, 1966:23). What most interested Parsons were those societies in which developmental “breakthroughs” occur, because he believed that once they occurred, the process of evolution would follow his general evolutionary model.

Although Parsons conceived of evolution as occurring in stages, he was careful to avoid a unilinear evolutionary theory: “We do not conceive societal evolution to be either a continuous or a simple linear process, but we can distinguish between broad levels of advancement without overlooking the considerable variability found in each” (1966:26). Making it clear that he was simplifying matters, Parsons distinguished three broad evolutionary stages—primitive, intermediate, and modern. Characteristically, he differentiated among these stages primarily on the basis of cultural dimensions. The crucial development in the transition from primitive to intermediate is the development of language, primarily written language. The key development in the shift from intermediate to modern is “the institutionalized codes of normative order,” or law (Parsons, 1966:26).

Parsons next proceeded to analyze a series of specific societies in the context of the evolution from primitive to modern society. One particular point is worth underscoring here: Parsons turned to evolutionary theory, at least in part, because he was accused of being unable to deal with social change. However, his analysis of evolution is not in terms of process; rather, it is an attempt to “order structural types and relate them sequentially” (Parsons, 1966:111). This is comparative structural analysis, not really a study of the processes of social change. Thus, even when he was supposed to be looking at change, Parsons remained committed to the study of structures and functions.

**Generalized Media of Interchange**

One of the ways in which Parsons introduced some dynamism, some fluidity (J. Alexander, 1983:115) into his theoretical system was through his ideas on the generalized media of interchange within and among the four action systems (especially within the social system) discussed previously. The model for the generalized media of interchange is money, which operates as such a medium within the economy. But instead of focusing on material phenomena such as money, Parsons focused on symbolic media of exchange. Even when Parsons did
discuss money as a medium of interchange within the social system, he focused on its symbolic rather than its material qualities. In addition to money, and more clearly symbolic, are other generalized media of interchange—political power, influence, and value commitments. Parsons made it quite clear why he was focusing on symbolic media of interchange: “The introduction of a theory of media into the kind of structural perspective I have in mind goes far, it seems to me, to refute the frequent allegations that this type of structural analysis is inherently plagued with a static bias, which makes it impossible to do justice to dynamic problems” (1975:98–99).

Symbolic media of interchange have the capacity, like money, to be created and to circulate in the larger society. Thus, within the social system, those in the political system are able to create political power. More importantly, they can expend that power, thereby allowing it to circulate freely in, and have influence over, the social system. Through such an expenditure of power, leaders presumably strengthen the political system as well as the society as a whole. More generally, it is the generalized media that circulate between the four action systems and within the structures of each of those systems. It is their existence and movement that gives dynamism to Parsons’s largely structural analyses.

As Jeffrey Alexander (1983:115) pointed out, generalized media of interchange lend dynamism to Parsons’s theory in another sense. They allow for the existence of “media entrepreneurs” (e.g., politicians) who do not simply accept the system of exchange as it is. That is, they can be creative and resourceful and in this way alter not only the quantity of the generalized media but also the manner and direction in which the media flow.
Criticisms and Contemporary Applications

Throughout this chapter we have introduced some of the more common criticisms of Parsons’s theory. His ideas were overly complex and abstract. He did not always clearly define his concepts. He did not provide an adequate theory of social change. And, at least from the perspective of 1960s radical sociologists, he was too conservative in his thought, emphasizing consensus over conflict.

This said, Parsons offered a grand theory of tremendous scope and imagination that has inspired others in similar endeavors. For example, in the 1980s Jeffrey Alexander (1983) developed a neo-functionalist sociology that built on Parsons’s basic insights. Also, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1982), who for a short time studied with Parsons, developed a systems theory intended to update Parsons’s work. Although critical of Parsons’s basic formulations, he nevertheless "affirmed systems theory, functional analysis, and attention to the differentiation of autonomous systems and subsystems as key analytic approaches” (Lidz, 2011:551).

In addition to its general inspiration of grand theory, Parsons’s ideas have been applied to understand specific contemporary problems. Despite the common characterization of Parsons as an abstract theorist, he wrote many policy papers on real-world issues. These often addressed pressing social concerns such as the rise of Nazism, McCarthyism, American foreign policy, the control of nuclear weapons and the civil rights movement (Lidz, 2011). Giuseppe Sciortino (2010) has argued that Parsons should be considered a key theorist of citizenship. In brief, citizenship refers to state-sanctioned forms of political and social inclusion. In the modern world, citizenship becomes a problem as more people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds move around the world as immigrants and refugees: Who is to be included? Who is a citizen? And what are the requirements of citizenship? In the context of Parsons’s AGIL schema, citizenship serves a social system’s integration (I) function. It is "linked to a primary feature of social integration—the self-reinforcing relationship between generalized membership and social pluralism" (Sciortino, 2010:240). For Parsons, citizenship evolves as a necessary and important component of increasingly differentiated, complex and pluralistic societies. In fact, based on his understanding of the evolution of society, Parsons advocated for a pluralistic society that encouraged citizenship for people from diverse backgrounds. Though some have criticized him as being overly optimistic, Parsons saw pluralism and broadening forms of citizenship as necessary and all but inevitable features of modern social systems.

Parsons has also been applied to discuss the contemporary issue of secularization (Vanderstraeten, 2012). This, too, touches on issues of social differentiation and inclusion. Secularization refers to the gradual disappearance of religious influences in modern social life. For much of the twentieth century, social scientists believed that secularization was an inevitable outcome of the development of modern society. Parsons bucked the trend and argued that secularization was not an inevitable (or even advisable) course of modernity. Though his views on religion were varied, Parsons argued that the increasing differentiation of society may actually protect religion from secular influences. Describing the situation of Christianity in the United States, Raf Vanderstraeten (2012:75) summarized Parsons’s position: “Differentiating systems are able to generate their own dynamics; they are able to develop their own rationality. Such differentiation processes also prevent religion (Christianity) from being absorbed in a non-religious environment, in this-worldly commitments.” In
short, increasingly complex, differentiated societies allow for the development of both religious and secular social forms. In this, Parsons has been proven correct, as the twenty-first century has seen a resurgence in religious belief and practice, both in America and around the world.
Summary

In a few short years, Talcott Parsons went from being the dominant figure in sociological theory to being, in some quarters, nearly a theoretical outcast. Neither extreme status is deserved. Parsons’s theoretical system always had serious weaknesses, but it is certainly not without major significance.

To his credit, Parsons articulated early in his work an interest in integrating the diverse levels of social analysis, and he maintained that interest, despite basic changes in his theoretical system, throughout his life. Most basically, Parsons was interested in integrating the social and personality systems. Despite such a laudable goal, his work has been marred by some basic confusions, specifically the uncomfortable mix of action theory and structural functionalism. On the basis of his analyses of the people whom he considered to be the major thinkers in the history of sociology, Parsons initially articulated what seemed to be a micro orientation in his action theory. This orientation is particularly clear in his emphasis on the unit act and voluntarism in his early work. However, over the years the unit act and voluntarism tended to disappear from Parsons’s theory, as did action theory. In its place, there evolved a structural-functional theory in which actors were seen not as acting in a voluntaristic manner but as constrained primarily by social structures and culture. In the 1940s and 1950s, Parsons developed new concepts such as need-dispositions, motivational orientations, and value orientations. All of these concepts reflected Parsons’s increasing tendency to see actors as constrained by external structures rather than as voluntaristic actors. Other well-known Parsonsian concepts were developed in this period, including the pattern variables and later the AGIL system. Through these changes, Parsons retained a lifelong interest in order and a preference for cultural rather than power solutions to the problem of order.

The heart of Parsons’s theory lies in his sense of the major levels of social analysis, especially the four action systems. Although Parsons is probably best known for his work on the social system, the most important level in his theory is the cultural system. It stands at the pinnacle of the four action systems and exercises control over the other three (the social, personality, and behavioral organism systems). Although the other levels are not completely controlled by the cultural system, Parsons described himself as a “cultural determinist.” Parsons retained an interest in the actor in his later work, but he talked of the personality system, not voluntaristic actors. The problem here is that Parsons tended to see the personality system as determined by the systems that stand above it, the social system and, particularly, the cultural system.

In his later work, Parsons sought to give his perspective more of a change orientation. This is reflected in his work on the evolution of societies. However, despite an apparent focus on change, Parsons’s ideas on evolution remained more structural and functional than change-oriented. Also in his later work, Parsons sought to give his approach more dynamism through his ideas on the generalized media of interchange.
Notes

1. Ironically, Parsons praised Durkheim for not doing grand theory, for doing what many critics felt Parsons never did, that is, integrating theory and reality: “Durkheim was a scientific theorist in the best sense of one who never theorized ‘in the air,’ never indulged in ‘idle speculation’ but was always seeking the solution of crucially important empirical problems” (1937:302).

2. Most often, to Parsons, the problem of order was related to the issue of why action was nonrandom or patterned. The issue of equilibrium was a more empirical question to Parsons. Nonetheless, Parsons himself often conflated the issues of order and equilibrium.

3. This is a controversial interpretation of Parsons’s work with which many disagree. François Bourricaud, for example, talked of “the dialectics of socialization” (1981:108) in Parsons's work and not of passive recipients of socialization.

4. Bernard Barber (1993, 1994) argued that although there is considerable terminological confusion in Parsons’s work, the idea of a social system should be restricted to inclusive, total systems such as societies.


6. To be fair, we must report that Parsons had done some earlier work on social change, but it did not become a paramount concern, and his contributions were minimal, until the 1960s (see Parsons, 1942, 1947; see also J. Alexander, 1981; Baum and Lechner, 1981).
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