

20-1-15  
AU-763

SOC 481

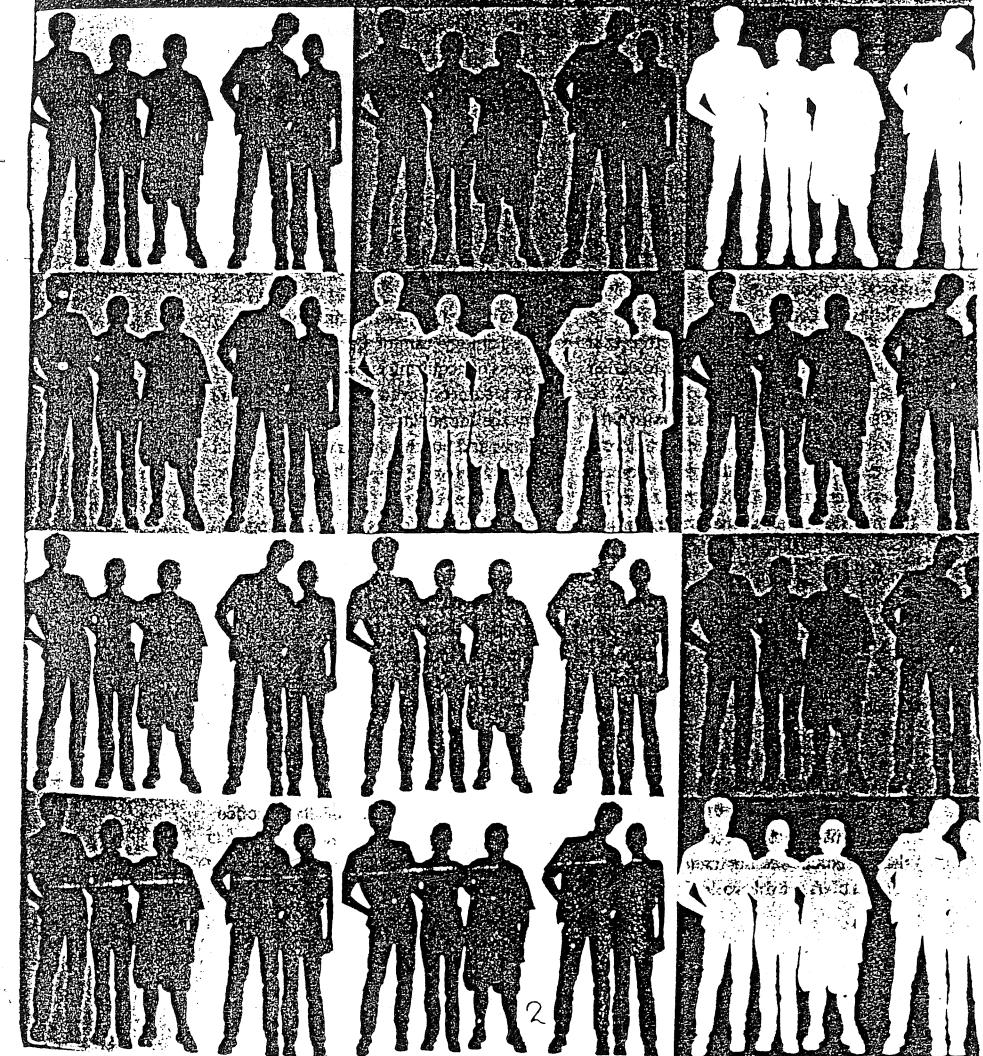
Dr. A. Chakrabarti

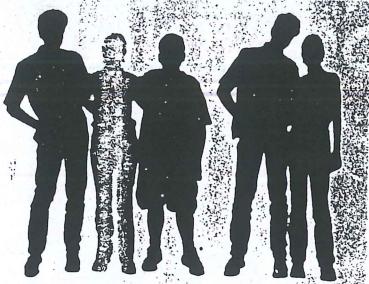
Anthony Giddens

1

# What is Sociology?

#1





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

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

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

Most of us see the world in terms of the

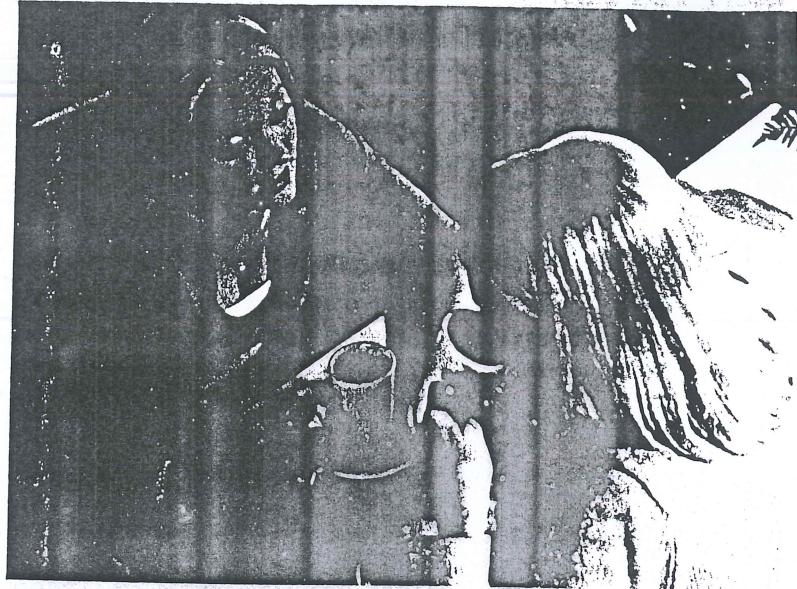
familiar features of our own lives. Sociology demonstrates the need to take a much broader view of why we are as we are, and why we act as we do. It teaches us that what we regard as natural, inevitable, good or true may not be such, and that the 'givens' of our life are strongly influenced by historical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

### The sociological perspective

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

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

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



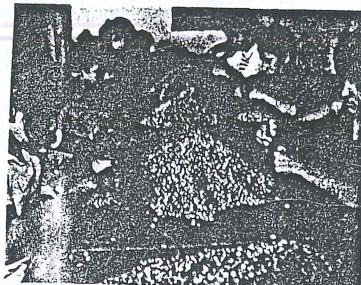
Getting together with friends for coffee is part of a social ritual.

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

### Studying sociology

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

Try applying this sort of outlook to your

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

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

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

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

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

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

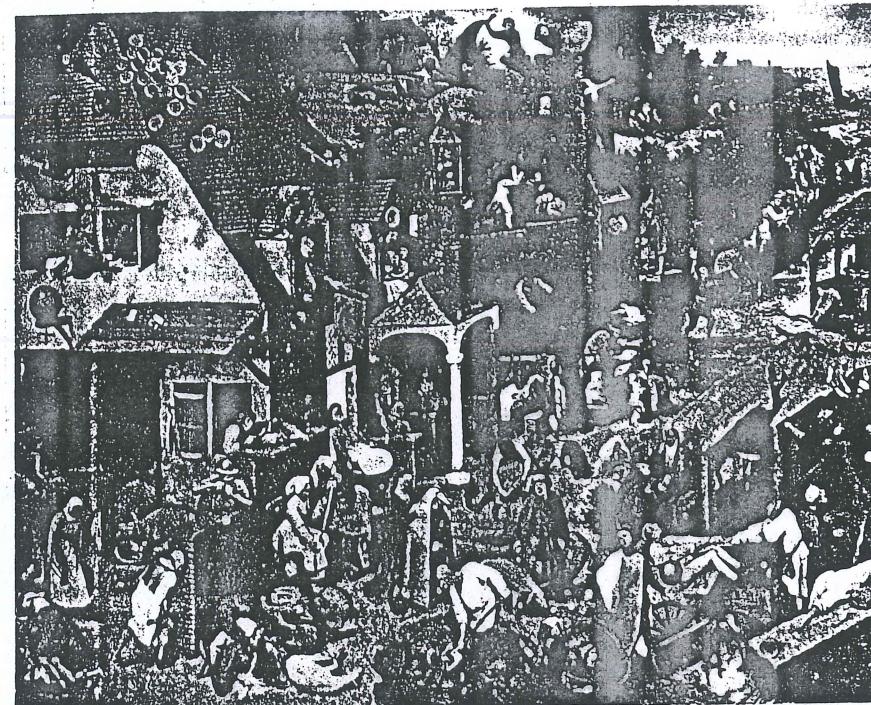
As an example, consider again the case of coffee. A cup of coffee does not automatically arrive in your hands. You choose, for example, to go to a particular coffee shop, whether to drink a latte or an espresso. As you make these decisions, along with millions of other people, you shape the market for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

## The development of sociological thinking

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

### Theories and theoretical approaches

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



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

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

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

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