

CAPITALISM AND CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY



John Bratton & David Denham

Fourth
Edition

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Fourth Edition

JOHN BRATTON AND DAVID DENHAM

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This new edition is dedicated to frontline health care workers who cared for us through the COVID-19 crisis, and to the families of those who lost their lives in doing so.

For my wife, Carolyn, Amy, Andrew and Elizabeth, Jennie and James, and our grandchildren, Owen, Colbie, Felicity, and Eloise.
– John Bratton

For my wife, Ann, Steven and Jennifer, Sarah and Rick, and our wonderful grandchildren, Georgia, Imogen, Ella, and Edward.
– David Denham

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Preface

Since the third edition of this book, we have witnessed seismic social, economic, political, and environmental changes that have reverberated worldwide. For Europe, and North America, and much of the world, these changes seem to have engendered a sense of multiple crises. The crisis ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shaken capitalism to its core, underscores how the global economy shapes the local, and our private lives. In an interconnected global economy, the coronavirus had, by April 2020, established a presence in the populations of Asia, Europe, and North and South America. By March 2022, the world had reached the somber milestone of six million COVID-19 deaths. Three other crises are undoubtedly human made. The first is Russia's egregious invasion of Ukraine, which poses a crisis across Europe and threatens peace outwith Europe. The second is the Israel-Gaza war, which could escalate and spread beyond the Middle East. Overshadowing these two crises is the third human-made crisis – the existential climate crisis. After scientists confirmed that July 2023 was set to be the world's hottest month on record, the UN secretary general, António Guterres, warned that the era of global warming had ended and "the era of global boiling has arrived."¹ Extreme weather events linked to global warming inflicted devastation on many parts of the world. The last two reports from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are significant in that they have identified human activity as

“unequivocally” the cause of rapid changes to the climate and point to the neoliberal capitalist model as the problem, not the solution to tackling the socio-ecological crisis.

These extreme contextual changes provide a backdrop to studying social theory unimaginable only a few years ago. The immediacy of war and ecological breakdown can distract us from the more persistent trends and features of contemporary Western society. Since the 1990s, what we now call neoliberal globalization has not only been the driving force behind industrialization in Asia and elsewhere – bringing more than a billion workers into the vortex of commodity production and volatile labor-markets – but, in the two countries that most closely embraced neoliberal capitalist ideologies and policies, the United States and Britain, it is also the harbinger of extreme inequalities and endemic poverty.

These developments overwhelmingly benefited the top 1 percent of the population – the owners of wealth and capital – and left the United States and Britain acutely divided by social class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Women continue to earn less than their male counterparts, are likely to be “pregnant and screwed” by their employer,² and face violent misogyny.³ In the United States, Black parents give their young teenagers “the talk” about why it could be life-threatening to answer a police officer back. In Britain, racism continues to be “part of the daily lives” of people from ethnic minorities,⁴ and it is widely reported that racism is endemic in the London police force.⁵ Concurrent is the destabilizing effect of artificial intelligence (AI). Technological change has been a constant feature of capitalism: from factories to robots to algorithmic technologies. A controversial open letter called for research on generative AI, such as ChatGPT, to be paused, warning that AI could precipitate “profound risks to society and humanity.”⁶ There is greater consensus that AI tools are already disrupting labor markets, work, and organizations, and about why AI lies at the core of what some observers call a Fourth Industrial Revolution.⁷ Added to this cauldron of gender violence, racism, and disruptive AI is the phenomenon of “fake news” and the culture of post-truth politics, alongside the forces of right-wing populism. Untruths and disinformation are disseminated through social media with the intent to mislead, to damage an entity or critics of the system, and/or to gain political advantage.

The central argument of this book is that the classical social thinkers speak to the present as much as the past. In considering the question of

why Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Luxemburg, or Du Bois might be relevant to the problems of today, American sociologist Michael Burawoy writes, “There are many answers to this question, but the most obvious one is that we are indeed returning to the desperate times of the 19th century – we are returning to the raw capitalism.”⁸

We shall attempt to illustrate the startlingly contemporary relevance of heroes and heroines of classical social theory, to critically analyze capital’s crisis-generation modus operandi and its ever-expanding destruction of jobs, the planetary environment, and extreme inequalities.

In previous editions, we referred to changes in global capitalism and academic discourses that have taken place, which affect the way that modernity has been studied over the last four decades. Sociologists have witnessed the ascendancy of rival intellectual approaches to the study of the social condition. For example, under the rubric of postmodernism, the traditional approach to researching aspects of society, loosely described as positivism, has been challenged by *constructionism* and *intersectionality*. The constructivist’s view challenges researchers to reexamine their frames of reference, the research process itself, and the production of knowledge.⁹ Intersectionality is a critical framework used for researching difference and social injustices and developing social policy.¹⁰ It recognizes that people’s lived experiences are better understood as being influenced not by a single axis of social division (such as race, class, gender, or sexuality), but by several overlapping identities that operate in parallel and influence each other.¹¹ Importantly, the post-modern approach, as Eagleton and Lyotard notably argue, celebrate the triumph of contingencies, social identities, and local fragmented specificities over any kind of totality.¹²

In this intellectual milieu, there will inevitably be disagreement among sociologists over which classical social theorist should be included in a textbook on classical theory. Membership of the classical canon is important, for the canon provides a shared language, a focus, some kind of identity for the discipline, and it shapes both the intellectual discourse and the trajectory of social research. In all previous editions of *Capitalism and Classical Social Theory*, we have chosen to be more inclusive and extended the coverage of the familiar sociological canon established around the 1970s – that is, the trio of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber – to include the German sociologist Georg Simmel, the intellectual contribution of the African American W.E.B. Du Bois,

the intellectual enterprise of the American academic George Herbert Mead, and four women intellectuals who theorized about gender roles, gendered work, and new patterns of family life that were the consequences of the emergence of industrial capitalism. In the third edition, to accommodate Mead, we had to make the difficult choice of removing Simmel. By request, this edition reinstates Simmel. Without any claim to exhaustivity, our choice of scholars was influenced by a common criticism of the “classical” canon: the marginalization of gender, race, racial exclusion, and colonial exploitation in its authors’ theories.

For this new edition, we extended further the coverage of the history of sociology by adding a new section on early American sociology. In discussing the contribution of social theory to public discourses, Alex Law observes, “Social theory ... stands aloof from the action, acting as if it is unaffected by the troubles of daily life and its vulgar interests ... social theory can seem remote and arcane.”¹³ To avoid classical social theory being esoteric and unmoored from contemporary real-life experiences, as in previous editions we provide insight into the relevance and application of the classical theorists with an emphasis on class, gender, and race, in what we call an age of inequality.

Capitalism and Classical Social Theory has three characteristics that make it different from most other publications on classical social theory. First, this book does not attempt to cover all classical social theorists but rather focuses selectively on certain significant thinkers and theories while including a range of other contributors to the expanded canon. Our aim is to provide the reader with *depth* of knowledge concerning the most significant contributions rather than with a superficial outline of all sociological works in the classical period from 1789 to 1920. The maxim “Jack of all trades, master of none,” when applied to a review of classical social theorists, may be paraphrased as “knowledge of many, understanding of none.” In our experience of teaching one-semester undergraduate courses in classical social theory, time permits only an adequate coverage of a limited number of social theorists in any depth.

Second, alongside our commentary, this book includes extended passages from the classical texts. The point of this is to counter the prejudice that classical texts are particularly difficult if not almost impossible to read, as well as to encourage the readers of this book to experience the prose and thoughts conveyed by the original texts. Anyone setting out to read the classical texts in English, however, is faced with

an overwhelmingly large collection of writings in different editions. With this in mind, we have endeavored, as far as possible, to include extended passages from the readily available English editions of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Wollstonecraft, Du Bois, Simmel, and Mead, which are referenced at the end of the book. Most important, the book is not designed to be a substitute for the classical texts.

Third, when quoting from the classical writings, this book deliberately does not change the words used by the authors. The terms “civilization,” “nation,” “race,” and “Negro” are rooted in the Enlightenment language.¹⁴ Using these terms is important to providing an adequate historical account of the intellectual and political discourses, but they are to be understood, without exception, in their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century meanings. For example, the discourse on “race” remained yoked to that of “nation” well into the twentieth century, and the latter term was associated with and reserved for political entities that had inherited the social beliefs and mores characteristic of “advanced” societies. We should note here that we also have not changed the original texts to be gender-neutral. When the classical writers use the word “man,” that is precisely whom they are usually referring to: a conspicuous deficiency in their theorizing, as will be explained.

One further point needs to be made about the classical theorists themselves. Although writing is an individual pursuit, at the same time learning and writing are social: they are nurtured by collective ideas, thoughts, and discourses – past and present. Thus, the social theorists matured and changed during their life experiences, so we find that the writings of the precocious Karl Marx or William Du Bois are sometimes different from those they wrote in their more mature years. Finally, while attentive to the historical context, the classical social theorists speak directly to the current multiple crises of climate breakdown, inequality, and social change on contemporary society, and to our own life experiences, in the twenty-first century.

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Acknowledgments

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PART 1

Context

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1

Early Sociology and the Classical Theorizing of Society

In his book *Victorian Cities*, Asa Briggs notes that most Victorian writers were both horrified and fascinated by new cities that seemed to represent “a system of life constructed on a wholly new principle.”¹ The discourse about large polyglot cities or metropolises was part of an intellectual debate about modern life that occurred in France, Germany, and the United States. The conditions of industrial capitalism provided the context for the development of what is now called classical social theory, which has become the principal frame of reference for modern sociology.²

Theorizing about society has deep historical roots. Egyptian prophets, Greek philosophers, and medieval scholars in Western Europe all sought to understand and explain the operations of their societies. In Western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – known as the modern period – there was an extraordinarily high level of philosophical engagement by male and female public intellectuals. In the eighteenth century, the writings of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Bonald, Maistre, Saint-Simon, Comte, Martineau, and Wollstonecraft, as well as those of the Scottish moral philosophers Hume, Smith, Ferguson, and Millar, provided the intellectual context for theorizing about new forms of social life and society that came to prevail first in Britain and subsequently worldwide.³

What ultimately characterizes eighteenth-century historiography and social thought is their universal perspective and progressive structure,

which are grounded in human nature. Eighteenth-century thinkers were broadly optimistic about social change, confident that the certainties of the natural sciences could be applied without problem to the study of civil society.⁴ By contrast, the first generation of *classical* social thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – conventionally most closely identified with the trinity of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber, but also including Georg Simmel, Mary Wollstonecraft, Rosa Luxemburg, W.E.B. (William) Du Bois, and others – were generally pessimistic. This first generation drew attention to how contradictions, dysfunctions, pathologies, and racism embodied nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European and North American society.

This book aims to provide a short introduction to classical social theory and its legacy, primarily for undergraduate students and general readers. The social thinkers of the “classical era” responded to the intellectual, economic, cultural, and political issues of their time, so we situate their core ideas within important historical events. We do not assume any prior knowledge of European or early North American history, the body of intellectual thought associated with the “Enlightenment,” or knowledge of the scholars who are the main focus of this book. This chapter is intended to serve as an introduction to a selection of prominent social scholars identified with “predisciplinary” European and American sociology, to make the initial case for studying the classical sociological canon, and to outline our approach to studying the selected classical thinkers.

EARLY EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGY: THE EMERGING SOCIOLOGICAL CANON

The word *theory* is one of the most important and used words in the lexicon of sociology.⁵ Theories in the social sciences are sets of interconnected words, webs of concepts and ideas that, taken together, purport to explain a given phenomenon or set of phenomena in the social world.⁶ Paul Mason believes “theories allow us to describe the reality we can’t see. And they allow us to predict.”⁷ Social theory is a “big tent” full of competing epistemological and ontological perspectives which seek to comprehend modernity.⁸ Since well before the modern era, philosophers and social theorists have wrestled with enduring questions

related to stability and conflict. Indeed, explicating the sources of stability and conflict in modern society dominated social theory for most of the twentieth century. On the question of stability, social theory seeks to account for patterns in social relationships and the way different types of social institutions connect to each other that lead people to experience life as stable or routine or, conversely, as chaotic and unpredictable. On the second question of conflict, social theory focuses on the factors that provoke individual or collective human action in a particular trajectory.

This book is about “classical” social theory. By that, we mean a body of literature, published sometime from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, which became the “canonical” foundations of sociology as an institutionalized discipline.⁹ The canonical texts are considered essential reading for academics and students in the social sciences, and for those in sociology in particular, because they “systematically developed consciousness of society and social relations”;¹⁰ they have relevance to modern sociology, and they are worth reading and rereading. They are classical not only because they provide a historical context for reading sociology, but also because they are living artifacts with contemporary relevance both to modern social sciences and to understanding our own society in the 2020s. As such, they provide a vocabulary for talking about contemporary social issues, such as technological change, inequality, well-being, and the climate crisis. They are also a way of reinterpreting and understanding one’s own experience in a new way. Many of the venerable classics endure because they “remain insightful and inspirational”;¹¹ they guide contemporary scholarship and inquiry by providing help in posing better research questions. Indeed, as Seth Abrutyn and Omar Lizard, two leading social theorists, recently argue, “sociology is amidst of a golden age of theorizing, but in a way that ‘returns to the classics’ in rejecting the idea of pure theory and accepting the fundamental unity of theory and method.”¹²

Sociology was conceived in Europe.¹³ The word *sociologie* was famously invented by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). As critical social theorist Adrian Favell explains, sociology as an academic discipline was born of, reflected, and articulated the rise of industrial modernity, capitalism, and the nation state in the North Atlantic West.¹⁴ Theorizing about human society – the core of what it means to be sociological – has a long, complex history. The earliest contributors to developing

proto-sociology were a group of Scottish scholars – members of the “Scottish Enlightenment” – who developed a social philosophy described as a “moral” science. Prominent scholars were Adam Ferguson, David Hume, John Millar, and Adam Smith (see [chapter 3](#)). Millar’s ideas on social classes, rooted in a division of labor and structure of property ownership, were influential for the work of Marx a century later. In the mid-nineteenth century, among the most prominent European scholars theorizing on modernity, including Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), Max Weber (1864–1920), Georg Simmel (1858–1918), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Karl Marx (1818–83), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), Friedrich Engel (1820–95), and Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), only Durkheim and Spencer were professional sociologists.

While Auguste Comte was laying the theoretical foundations for French sociology and Georg Hegel influenced German social theory, Herbert Spencer, the first professor of sociology in Britain, published *The Principles of Sociology* (1873–93). His cardinal contribution was his work on the “social organism” – individuals are linked not through physical connections, but through their linguistic communications. For Spencer, social structures have their reality only because human individuals can communicate their intentions to others and so can sustain cooperative patterns of action. Social structures are mutually supportive as they make “functional” contributions to each other’s continued existence. These functional interconnections “evolve” through individuals adapting to the environment in which they live. According to Spencer, a failure to adapt will lead to functional breakdown. Spencer’s model of the social organism had a major influence on the work of Durkheim,¹⁵ and it shaped the ideas of America’s first professor of sociology, William Graham Sumner (1840–1910).

Discussions on the early history of sociology concentrate on Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. In this brief overview, only the English-speaking countries are discussed. In Britain, the first university professorship with the designation “sociology” was established at the London School of Economics in 1907. Despite the legacy of the early contributors to proto-sociology and Spencer’s direct influence on French and American sociology, the Department of Sociology at the LSE grew only slowly. Britain’s other universities produced limited growth in university courses in sociology. There are multiple reasons for this:

Spencer's evolutionary ideas on society were rejected by many academics; the elite universities demonstrated a lack of incentive to develop a new discipline; and research on the human condition was conducted in other well-established university departments. Significant expansion only came in the 1960s in an era of optimism, the radicalization of politics, and the awakening of the student movement.¹⁶

British sociology began to exhibit the influence of Marxian ideas, German social theory, and American sociology in the mid-twentieth century. Social theory addressed the enduring question: "What are the sources of social change and social order?" For answers, Left-leaning sociologists draw inspiration from the metanarrative of Karl Marx. At the center of Marx's social theorizing is the primacy of capitalist production and the social relations that govern the production of goods and services, and how these shape and change the social life of society. For Marx, the dual axis of order and change not only coexist but they are fashioned together, because the same process – the class structure – that brings cooperation and order also causes tension and conflict. Marx's sociology was highly influential in the 1960s and 1970s. As American social theorist Vivek Chibber posits, for the political Left, "the theory's basic elements had become a kind of *common sense*."¹⁷ The class conflict theorist Ralf Dahrendorf was an influential figure on interpreting and explaining Marxian concepts of class, class interests, and class conflict.¹⁸ Guest lectures by American sociologists Edward Shils and Talcott Parsons exposed British sociology to "structural functionalism." David Lockwood argued for the blending of structural functionalism with a Marxian view of systemic contradictions. His ground-breaking book, *The Blackcoated Worker*, changed the way British sociologists study class.¹⁹ Competing with Marx were the social theories of Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. Durkheim's influential parse of industrial societies focused on how their complex division of labor and their diverse and conflicting interests were held together by shared norms and values. To explicate the sources of order and conflict, sociologists also draw, directly or indirectly, on Weber's work that directed attention to the role of ideas in social change, the importance of rationality, and wholesale rationalization in all spheres of life, which brought about disenchantment. Simmel's modernist approach to studying urban life and cultural interpretation influenced debate on the self of the individual,

the individual's embedment in cities, and the regulation of human behavior therein.

Even though Marxism was undeniably the most widely held social theory among Left-leaning European intellectuals, his full membership in the Anglo-Saxon sociological canon is relatively recent – the late 1960s. The so-called Marx-Durkheim-Weber triumvirate became firmly entrenched by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens²⁰ and after new English translations and books of readings were released. Disagreement between the members of the sociology community about which intellectual “giant” was responsible for establishing sociology underscore the ongoing discourse that the classical canon is a product of the translations of selected classical authors largely undertaken by White, male, Anglo-Saxon scholars.²¹

EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

The nineteenth-century development of American sociology is typically explained by the institutional structures, material resources, or the scholarly outputs of a few academics, to the exclusion of others. The first course in sociology was offered at Yale University in 1875, the first department was established at the University of Kansas in 1889, and the discipline started its own journal, *American Journal of Sociology*, in 1894. Table 1.1 shows the first generation of American sociologists. Lester Ward at Brown University, Albion Small at the University of Chicago, William Graham Sumner at Yale, and Franklin Giddings at Columbia were elected officers or members of the newly formed American Sociological Association in 1905 and are known as the “four founders” of American sociology. Giddings, Small, Sumner, and Ward became presidents of the Association. While European social scholars constructed “grand” or metanarratives about capitalism, the writings of the American pioneers, if read closely, collectively developed a different sociology tempered with the doctrine of pragmatism – an emphasis on the practical function of knowledge as an instrument for adapting to social reality and controlling it. Indeed, America's leading social elites and philanthropists “warmly embraced” the new discipline of sociology because of its perceived practical application to buttress society's structure in the face of multiple pressures toward dissolution, for example,

Table 1.1. Early American sociologists and their major publications

Sociologists	Major publications
Jane Addams (1860–1935)	<i>Democracy and Social Ethics</i> (1902); <i>Child Labor</i> (1905); <i>Twenty Years at Hull-House</i> (1910)
Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929)	<i>Nature versus Nurture</i> (1896); <i>The Process of Social Change</i> (1902); <i>Human Nature & Social Order</i> (1902); <i>Social Organization</i> (1909); <i>Social Process</i> (1918)
W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963)	<i>The Philadelphia Negro</i> (1897); <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (1903); <i>Dark Water</i> (1920)
Charles Abram Ellwood (1873–1946)	<i>Public Relief & Private Charity</i> (1903); <i>Sociology & Modern Social Problems</i> (1910); <i>Sociology in Its Psychological Aspects</i> (1912)
Franklin Henry Giddings (1855–1931)	<i>The Theory of Sociology</i> (1894); <i>Theory of Socialization</i> (1897); <i>Inductive Sociology</i> (1901); <i>The Scientific Study of Human Society</i> (1924). Third president of the American Sociological Association
Robert Ezra Park (1864–1944)	<i>The Man Further Down</i> (1912); <i>Introduction to the Science of Sociology</i> (1921); <i>The City</i> (1925)
Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)	<i>The Yellow Paper</i> (1892); <i>Women & Economics</i> (1898); <i>The Home: Its Work & Influence</i> (1903); <i>Human Work</i> (1904); <i>The Man-Made World</i> (1911); <i>Social Ethics</i> (1914)
Edward Alsworth Ross (1866–1951)	<i>Social Control</i> (1901); <i>Foundations of Sociology</i> (1905); <i>Changing America</i> (1912); <i>What Is America</i> (1919); <i>The Russian Bolshevik Revolution</i> (1921)
Albion Woodbury Small (1854–1926)	<i>Introduction to the Study of Society</i> (1894); <i>General Sociology</i> (1905); <i>The Meaning of the Social Sciences</i> (1910); <i>Between Eras: From Capitalism to Democracy</i> (1913). Fourth president of the American Sociological Association
William Graham Sumner (1840–1910)	<i>The Study of Sociology</i> (1873); <i>The Science of Society</i> (1927), co-author. Second president of the American Sociological Association
Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929)	<i>The Higher Learning in America</i> (1918); <i>The Vested Interests & the Common Man</i> (1919)
Lester Frank Ward (1841–1913)	<i>Dynamic Sociology</i> (1883). First president of the American Sociological Association

Note: Due to word limit, some of the titles have been shortened.

the social and political pressures arising from large-scale waves of European immigrants arriving between 1870 and 1914.

The era up to the 1920s has been described as “prehistory,” when the first generation of sociologists sought to reconcile sociology’s engagement with social movements and reformism with its attempt to establish itself as a discipline grounded in scholarly objectivity: “Separating objective analysis from advocacy was seen as central to the credibility

of the field,” writes Stephen Turner.²² Using more polemical language, George Steinmetz makes a similar point: “From the start US sociology has been torn between the motives of social do-gooderism and truth seeking.”²³ Turner posits that a consequential solution to that intellectual struggle was the establishment of “value-free” *Inductive Sociology* by Franklin Giddings, which introduced data-driven, quantitative-oriented sociological inquiry. Mainstream sociology was to become a “science of facts”; the core of its methodology consisted in “testable correlational hypotheses about relations between measurable variables, variables that the sociologist defined.”²⁴ The obvious causalities in this intellectual struggle included Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and W.E.B. Du Bois. The trio’s exclusion from the American canon reflects two important themes about early American sociology: the exclusion of women from the new male-dominated discipline and the increasing marginalization of advocacy and the reformist cause that Addams and Du Bois represented.²⁵ And to emphasize the point, though Perkins Gilman’s and Du Bois’s scholarly outputs to sociology were prodigious, neither were recognized as “founders” of American sociology until relatively recently.

Several of the early American sociologists, including Mead and Du Bois, had studied in Germany and were exposed to German social theory. Sociologists Albion Small, Robert Park, Charles Cooley, and W.I. Thomas were attracted to the individualistic, psychological approach of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904), who conceived sociology as based on minute psychological interactions among individuals, and Georg Simmel’s theory of sociation. Durkheim criticized both Tarde and Simmel for failing to grasp society as a collective phenomenon. As a sociologist, William Sumner was deeply influenced by Darwinism and Herbert Spencer’s model of the social organism. Lester Ward, in contrast to Herbert Spencer and William Sumner, criticized laissez-faire policies and was a strong advocate of a welfare state, equal rights for women, and the abolition of White supremacy. Ward’s principal contribution to sociology was his work on the superiority of the conscious over the unconscious control of the social process. The essence of his perspective is that “[h]uman society ... is not the passive product of unconscious forces. It lies within the domain of cosmic law, but so does the mind of man: and this mind of man has knowingly, artfully, adapted, and re-adapted its social environment, and with reflective intelligence has begun

to shape it into an instrument wherewith to fulfil man's will."²⁶ Ward's parse that individuals knowingly adapt their social environment arguably echoes elements of Spencer's social theory that functional interconnections "evolve" through individuals adapting to their environment.

After World War I, American sociological "giants" renounced their European intellectual heritages (especially German) and developed their own conception of what sociology should mean and how research, curricula, and pedagogy should achieve its goals. Public universities were controlled by boards, usually of leading social elites; private universities by boards dominated by philanthropists. Neither group was likely to be empathetic to funding research on radical reform.²⁷ Mainstream sociologists knew who their supporters were, and therefore engaged in robust data-driven empirical research which would ingratiate themselves with those administrators who controlled their universities' budgets.

The ideology of American individualism, combined with empiricism and social psychology, effectively precluded the development of "grand" theories of society in mainstream US sociology in the manner of the European metanarratives of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. This early reframing of American sociology is perhaps best illustrated by George Herbert Mead. Between 1888 and 1891, Mead worked on his doctoral thesis in Germany, and the German philosophy of dialectics influenced his academic work, tempered by the American philosophy of pragmatism. After moving back to America in 1891, he focused on developing an anthropological theory of communication and became known for his pragmatist, Americanized theory of interaction and the social self.

In the 1920s, the University of Chicago listed the German sociologists Simmel and Durkheim as notable contributors to the new social science but not Marx or Weber. Durkheim's work on research methodology and his references to social unity and "bonds of interdependence" secured his place early in the American sociological canon. As for Weber, though he was a founding member of the German Sociological Society, his contemporaries never regarded him as a founding thinker of sociological theory.²⁸ After 1945, a new discourse of functionalism developed in the work of Talcott Parsons (1902–79), writes Alan Swingewood.²⁹ It was Parsons who established Weber as a full-fledged member of the sociological canon. From Parsons's interpretation of Weber's work, it became accepted parlance that Weber intended his best-known work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as a refutation of

Marx's thesis on capitalism. It was not until the 1970s that American undergraduate students were introduced to Marx as "the first great radical sociologist."³⁰ This was alongside the emergence of the postcolonial intellectual movement when decolonial scholars began the unremitting critique of "positivism," the canonical syllabi, and their Eurocentric-orientated philosophies in North American universities.³¹

By now it should be apparent to you that the canonizing process is not neutral but is a product of what Elizabeth Goodstein calls "institutionalized modes of commemorating" the classical founders of sociology, at a particular moment in the history of British and American universities.³² The canonization process reflects the values and worldviews of members of the dominant culture, sociologists included. Therefore, that some social theorists were excluded or forgotten is not necessarily about the omitted oeuvre's true qualities, which can be demonstrated by comparing the works of Wollstonecraft, Martineau, and Du Bois with the canonical inclusions. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Martineau's *Society in America*, and Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk* are classics in every respect as significant as Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*, Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and Weber's *The Protestant Ethic*.³³ A plausible case can be made that British and American sociology was blind to issues of gender and color, which rendered the intellectual contributions of early female intellectuals and Du Bois invisible and excluded them from the "classical" canon.³⁴

TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE CANON

Contemporary sociology presents the origins of the discipline grounded in the works of the Marx-Durkheim-Weber triumvirate and the Giddings-Small-Sumner-Ward quadrumvirate, defining the "canon" by geography and time. There are several persuasive critiques of the classical canon.³⁵ It was predominantly the creation of White, male, Anglo-Saxon intellectuals, in a period of gender and racial discrimination and exclusion. Gender and racial issues have an epistemic edge, which in American sociology appears as the problem of separating reform advocacy from objective analysis.³⁶ The canonical writers devoted scant theoretical attention to gender and race as critical dimensions in the

development of modernity, and critiques have understandably been proffered.³⁷ In the twentieth century, scholarship on the sociology of work, for example, continued to be concerned with male workers. The work of women was largely, in Sheila Rowbotham's memorable observation, hidden from history.³⁸ Over several decades, gender has become a concept to be wrestled with, as represented by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's classic paper "Doing Gender," in which gender is conceptualized as a social construct routine, an accomplishment embedded in everyday social interaction.³⁹ Gender is here referred to as a group of ideas that grew out of and developed through the scholarship of the classical feminist thinkers concerned with women's liberation. Indeed, the early feminist writers spawned ideas on social and cultural interpretations that turn sexual difference into more than a merely biological distinction.⁴⁰ The process of creating and acting on gendered social constructs underscores theories of gender roles, gender inequality, power, and women's subordination and oppression. These problems were all addressed in different ways by early feminist thinkers.

This book offers a review of a more inclusive canon by including two omitted dimensions of the social world – gender and race. We examine gender through the respective writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Rosa Luxemburg. These "first wave" feminist thinkers critically examined the plight of women oppressed through a variety of entrenched social processes, such as patriarchal strategies, sexism, and misogyny.

In the English-speaking world, the roots of feminism can be traced to social movements in England and America. In England, the feminist discourse goes back to at least the 1640s and the Levellers' movement. Leveller women campaigned for political and social reforms, proclaiming their unflagging resolve: "Nor will we ever rest until we have prevailed, that We, our husbands, Friends, and Servants, may not be liable to be abused, violated, and butchered at men's Wills and pleasures."⁴¹ Running through the history of feminism was the insistence that women's subordination is an unnatural and unnecessary condition that can and should be abolished; that equality for women was a prerequisite to free both man and woman for true emancipation. In the nineteenth century the most prominent English women theorizing about the links between gender and society were Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Martineau. Wollstonecraft highlights gender segregation in education,

positing that women should be given the education necessary to compete with men on an equal basis. Martineau explores the contradiction between the American ideals of freedom and democracy and the structural inequalities of race and gender. The years prior to World War I were a turbulent period for the “first” wave of feminists in Britain. The English suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst was a prominent campaigner for women’s rights. In 1913, she was jailed and another political activist, Emily Davison, was killed campaigning for equal rights.

In America, after the American Revolutionary War (1775–83) the feminist movement developed alongside the campaign to abolish slavery. In 1848, the “first wave” of American feminists held a convention to discuss “the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman.” In 1851, Sojourner Truth, who was born a slave, gave her famous “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech. Truth dedicated her life to abolishing slavery and to women’s rights. Other prominent leaders in the suffragette movement from this early period include Lucy Gage, Susan B. Anthony, and Margaret Sanger. Betty Friedan wrote that feminism in nineteenth-century America was not a “dirty joke” and observes that a decade before Mary Wollstonecraft published her masterpiece, an American woman, Judith Sargent Murray, espoused that women needed knowledge to envision new goals.⁴² In 1853, the Rev. Theodore Parker preached in Boston that “[t]o make one half of the human race consume its energies in the functions of housekeeper, wife and mother is a monstrous waste of the most precious material God ever made.”⁴³ The shortcomings of the “first wave” of American feminism were, like the English movement, related to its lack of inclusion of women of color, and it ignored other pressing issues impacting working-class women.

The classical thinkers and early sociologists, it is argued, looked for the essence of modernity through the prism of “European exceptionalism”⁴⁴ and neglected the role of colonialism, slavery, and race as a “fundamental axis” in American society. The legacy of slavery, racial exclusions, and racism that imbued American society and the capitalist labor process were invisible in the official canon.⁴⁵ Both the meaning and significance of race have been evolving over centuries; indeed, race is one of the most contestable concepts in sociology, not least because of its supposedly “scientific” basis and the previous usage of the term in eugenics. In many ancient civilizations, distinctions were often drawn between social groups based on visible differences in skin color, usually

between darker and lighter skin tones. In Europe, premodern “enlightened” scholars developed racial hierarchies based on “objective” procedures of observation of the physical differences between human beings, which would contribute decisively to the development of theories about racial inferiority. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the words *monogenism* and *polygenism* appeared in anthropological writings, and these terms designated opposing early explanations of race. The monogenetic hypothesis had biblical origins whereas the polygenetic hypothesis developed as a response to the discovery of “savages” in the New World.

The intellectual discourse on humanism and race, as we explain in [chapter 3](#), denied the unity of humankind and led to the justification of slavery in premodern Europe and, later, to the practice of using slave labor to exploit the colonies.⁴⁶ In the nineteenth century, a landmark publication by Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau (1816–82), *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, proposed the idea of three races: White (Caucasian), Black (Negroid), and Yellow (Mongoloid).⁴⁷ Gobineau’s physical classifications were combined with ideas about the superiority of the “Nordic strain” and then with the general notion of inherent racial inequalities. Theories of innate racial superiority intersected with the political doctrine of imperialism, which saw England and other European nation-states ruling over colonial lands and populations. For some, race and slavery were the twinned catalysts of capitalist modernity. Race was capitalism’s ordering principle, its moral authority, its economy and commerce, and its power.⁴⁸

According to historian Eric Hobsbawm, in the period when sociology was developing, between 1875 and 1914, the idea that humanity was divided by “race” penetrated the ideology almost as deeply as the notion of “progress” itself. Moreover, racism played a central role in nineteenth-century egalitarian liberal ideology because it passed the blame for visible social inequalities from society to “nature.”⁴⁹ As an example of racism prevalent among the British ruling elite, Winston Churchill, the revered British prime minister during World War II (1939–45), expressed racist and antisemitic sentiments. In 1919, Churchill declared, “I do not understand the squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favor of using poisonous gas against *uncivilized tribes*.” He also expressed repugnant racist views about North American Indigenous Peoples, stating in 1937, “I do not admit ... that a great wrong

has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia ... by the fact that a stronger race, a *higher-grade race* ... has come in and taken its place.”⁵⁰ The ideas of Gobineau influenced the German Nazi party in the 1930s, the government of South Africa until the end of apartheid, and White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the United States.⁵¹ Also, Elijah Anderson argues that Du Bois’s social study of the Black community in Philadelphia was funded by White “progressives” who were “prey to eugenic nightmares.”⁵²

After 1945, “race science” and eugenics were thoroughly discredited.⁵³ Nevertheless, race remains a highly contested concept. This is demonstrated by the fact that some contemporary social theorists refer to race and others to “race.” Placing the word race in quotation marks is meant to emphasize that race, like gender, can only be understood as a social and ideological construct.⁵⁴ The notion of race as a social construct downplays the extent to which sections of the population may form a discrete ethnic group – that is, learn and share certain characteristics on the basis of common historical origins, supportive patterns of social interaction, and a sense of identity. Because early sociology in Europe and the United States developed within a cultural milieu suffused with centuries of Christian teachings and with ideas concerning the innate intellectual superiority and genetic strength of Western people, the discipline could hardly avoid being shaped by this ideological climate.

Over six decades after Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech on August 26, 1963, this book explores the second dimension of the social world that has been neglected in the classical canon – race. We turn to the best-known writings of America’s preeminent African American scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois, to examine this concept. Du Bois, whose writings bring to prominence the issues of race and cultural identity, are now regarded as classic expressions of “Black sociology,”⁵⁵ but are largely invisible in the official canon of social theory classics. For Du Bois, race is a deeply historical, social, and ideological construct; it functioned as a key part of his sociological and political writings, from his exposition of the struggles against segregation, structured racism, and class exploitation to his examination of self-identity and pan-African politics. The approaches of the classical sociological canon, which often privilege a specific class, gender, or race, suggest a need not only for nuanced concepts but also for multidimensional analysis that can call attention



Photo 1.1. Cities are equated with modernity. They are at the same time the machinery and the heroine of modernity. The historical processes of possession and dispossession also mean cities are zoned according to the wealth of different kinds of residents. This image shows the city of Toronto around 1900.

to voices omitted and connections – to the commonalities as well as to the differences between dimensions of the social world.⁵⁶

MODERNITY AND THE CLASSICAL THEORIZING OF SOCIETY

Modernism is very much an urban phenomenon. It has existed, since 1850, in a complex relationship with the experience of capitalism, explosive urban growth, and a confluence of urban-based intellectual ideas and political movements. Capitalism is a way of organizing economic activity. Capitalist activities and institutions began to develop throughout Europe during the Renaissance period, dating from the 1400s, and continued throughout the premodern era. The production and exchange of commodities, however, were restrained by traditional religious and political controls.

Capitalist modernity has come to define the vast and largely unregulated expansion of commodity production and related market and monetary networks. It is identified with a specific class structure: a capitalist class that owns production assets (e.g., factories) on one side and the asset-meager working class on the other. Since the class structure places every worker in a position of subordination to the capitalist (or managers who act as “agents of capital”), there is an imbalance of power between these two dominant classes. The *leitmotiv* of capitalism puts expansion and accumulation – a continuous process that results from the exploitation of wage-labor – first, and this process initiates constant technical innovation which, in turn, disrupts and changes the class structure as some occupations and skills become obsolete.

The modernist discourses have long conceived cities as the epicenters of innovation, technological progress, and personal freedom. As emblematic of profound social change, cities are equated with modernity. They are “simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity.”⁵⁷ In Weber’s *General Economic History*, the city is the crucible of modernity, an economic space: the location of invention and reinvention, commerce, manufacturing, and new kinds of occupations. Cities are the primary place of cultural development and scientific thinking, and they house specific religious institutions that produce theological thought.⁵⁸ Cities, too, have long been acknowledged as spaces where urbanites can give liberty to imagination and play, challenge orthodoxy, and discover their sense of identity. But the development of cities can also be depicted as the outcome of “historical processes of possession and dispossession,” with the urban landscape zoned according to the assets of the inhabitants, denoting class, racial segregation, and inequality.⁵⁹ Further, in the classical era, cities instilled a sense of class and ethnic identity among the poor living in working-class enclaves.⁶⁰

Modernity has two sides. The first is the spread of a new economic model located primarily in new urban centers. The second but less obvious side to modernity is its unrelenting change, its insecurity, its ambiguity, and its totalizing chaos. Berman provides an insightful description of modernity:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy

everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air.”⁶¹

The collage of capitalist modernity is a quilt stitched together with patches from both the premodern and the new industrial society – patches of agriculture, small manufacturing, villages, kinship, landed interests, monarchy, religion, tradition, and, with increasing dominance, new patches of factories, cities, individualism, business interests, democracy, science, and reason. The traditional framing of modernity is that it signifies creativity, innovation, aestheticism, wealth, and individual freedom and identity. It also exhibits chaotic change, poverty, human degradation, and inequality.

The uneducated, by definition, leave few written accounts of their lived experiences. For the most part, historians have been the ones to document exhaustively the social reverberations of modernity. Working-class women and children suffered the brunt of the chaotic change and adjustment. As the laboring poor migrated to the old and new cities, the bottom layer of the mid-Victorian social pyramid witnessed growing numbers of paupers and prostitutes. Industrialization and urbanization were accompanied by an increase in homelessness and child prostitution and by the growth of a permanent underclass of the extreme poor – “stunted and debilitated” – living in urban slums or ghettos. On average, children from upper-class private schools were twelve centimeters taller than children from working-class schools.⁶² Behind the picture of urban wealth is a story of the destitute, disempowered, dispossessed, and disinherited: those described by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke as “ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs” constitute the ugly side of modernity.⁶³ The collage of modernity appears similar to a well-known drawing in psychology textbooks, an image that can be seen at the same time as a beautiful young woman and as an old crone.⁶⁴

Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1859, perhaps best captures the life experience of capitalist modernity: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."⁶⁵

European "enlightenment" thinkers in the eighteenth century viewed modernity through a conceptual prism of rationalism, positivism, universalism, and a belief in linear progress. They welcomed the maelstrom of change as a necessary prerequisite for modernity and believed that the sciences would not only control and harness natural forces but also promote understanding of society and of the self.⁶⁶ In the early twentieth century, the optimism of Enlightenment thought and modernity was challenged, in part, by the White male canonical writers but also by early feminist thinkers and by socialist movements, which introduced a class, race, and gender dimension into modernism.

THE LEGACY OF THE CLASSICAL CANON

British and American philosophers, historians, and sociologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought their own ways to confront and make sense of the processes of economic and social change and to explain the key characteristics of capitalist modernity as contrasted with premodern society. In Europe, the overwhelming interest of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, writes Anthony Giddens, was in "the delineation of the characteristic structure of modern 'capitalism' as contrasted with prior forms of society."⁶⁷ At the center of Marx's theorizing is capitalism's historic *raison d'être* of expansion and accumulation and how this ongoing process shapes the political and social life of society. For Marx, capitalism is modernity, and modernity is capitalism.⁶⁸ Durkheim theorized that industrial societies, with their complex division of labor and conflicting interests, constitute a moral entity held together by shared norms and values. Weber tried to understand modernity through the concept of rationality. He emphasized wholesale rationalization in all spheres of life, the irreversible development of bureaucracy,

and increasing secularization. For Weber, these developments describe modernity.⁶⁹

By way of summarizing the selected sociological canon, and as a heuristic device to help navigate through the classics, [figure 1.1](#) frames the theoretical dimensions of modernity. It shows the interplay of six core concepts probed by the classical writers – *materiality* (Karl Marx), *morality* (Émile Durkheim), *rationality* (Max Weber), *culture* (George H. Mead and Georg Simmel), *gender* (Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Perkins Gilman), and *race* (Harriet Martineau and W.E.B. Du Bois).⁷⁰ By extending the dimensions of society to include gender and race, we strive to eschew a “historicist” approach to studying classical social theory centering on the trio of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Without the early feminists’ efforts, writes Rosemarie Putnam Tong, many women today could not have attained their newfound professional stature.⁷¹ Today early feminist writers still inspire⁷² and provide sophisticated understanding of the gender-based, persistent, and pervasive injustices that women continue to experience in all areas of life. For example, were Mary Wollstonecraft to reappear today, she would be outraged but probably not surprised that, in the twenty-first century, Canadian women can be murdered and then victimized by “the bland racist, sexist and ‘classist’ prejudices buried in Canadian society.”⁷³ Similarly, if Du Bois were alive today, he would be incensed, but probably not surprised, that Black drivers on the streets of London or New York can be victims of sustained harassment by police because of the color of their skin.⁷⁴

Although there are limits to what can be portrayed reasonably in a diagram, our diagram also indicates the antecedents on the development of social thought provided by Europe’s dual revolution – industrial and political – and by the intellectual thinking arising from the Enlightenment. The lines and arrows between the six major concepts explored by the canonical theorists are not intended to suggest causal relationships; they are meant to convey to the reader that classical intellectual thinking is a complex, deeply rich, interrelated set of accumulated knowledge and ideas. Alan Swingewood makes the valid point that “the history of sociology is never a history of a selective canon but a dialogue between the present and the past, how ideas born in different historical periods and cultures survive as active elements in contemporary sociological thought.”⁷⁵ Thus, [figure 1.1](#) refers to an arena of public discourse constituting the different perspectives and theoretical positions on capitalist modernity that define classical sociological theory.

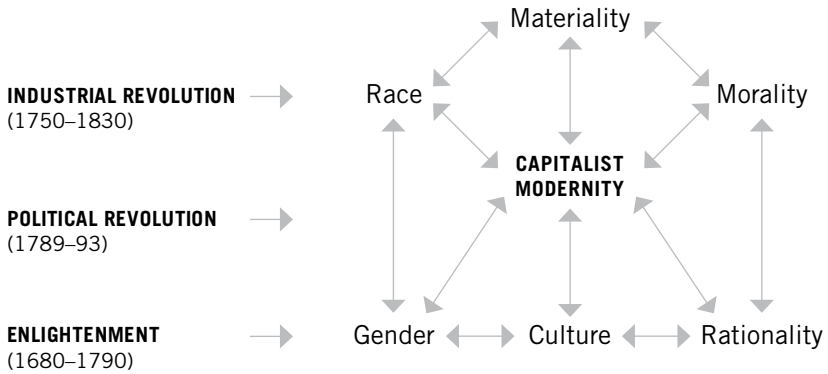


Figure 1.1. The classical theorizing of society

A number of sociologists have questioned the value of the classical canon and of the concepts derived from studies of contemporary modernity. This skepticism has been fueled by two main sets of arguments. First is the claim that advanced Western societies have shifted to a qualitatively new form of society known as late modernity or postmodernity. Adherents to this standpoint argue that, in view of the fact that society has undergone a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices, and also economic, social, and cultural orders,⁷⁶ sociological theories should be recast to make them relevant for the new postmodern world. This intellectual climate brings into question the intellectual credibility and status of Marx in the canon, as does scholarly interest in postmodernism.⁷⁷

As evidence of the new social world, critics have argued, for example, that the classical social theorists are irrelevant in the era of postmodernism because global competitive advantage stems from processing information and intellectual capital—the so-called knowledge economy—rather than from commodities and manual dexterity.⁷⁸ Although globalization is a contested concept, it is arguably about the unfettered pursuit of profit and the primacy of multinational power over local power.⁷⁹ A significant body of literature connects globalization to postmodernity, particularly around themes such as the ever increasing globalization of capitalism, the global division of labor and power, and the globalization of mass culture. It also provides theoretical and empirical support for the thesis that postmodernity is not simply a quantitative extension of modernity but a qualitatively new phenomenon.

The skepticism surrounding the value of the classical theories has been fueled by a second claim that these theories are, by and large, oblivious to problems concerning gender distinctions within employment (in particular), to male-dominated interests, and to social power. It is contended that members of the classical canon “gazed upon a masculine world,” and their works are said to be blind to gender issues.⁸⁰ Another notable related problem with these classical works is that they are ethnocentric and Eurocentric. Sociologists are less divided on the merits of this weakness. The classical theorists saw social change as a global phenomenon, but they saw it through a prism that defined modernity in terms of “Euro-American” White culture and religious models.⁸¹ However, colonization took place within the violent context of European religious and cultural norms, most notably within the context of Euro-American complicity in colonial genocides in South and North America, in slavery, and in the aggressive proselytizing in Africa and Asia. As a result, analysis to examine the new society independently of the economics and politics of European colonialism and hegemony and of the concomitant national repercussions on social mechanisms becomes increasingly problematic. Though accepting many of the past critiques, our book is animated by the view that the writings of the first generation of social theorists, focusing on capitalism’s contradictions, dysfunctions, and pathologies, offer powerful conceptual tools for analyzing late modernity – and for engaging in the current multiple debates on globalization, inequality, artificial intelligence, women’s subordination and oppression, race and cultural identity, multiculturalism,⁸² and a heating planet and its detrimental effects.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into three parts and seventeen chapters. In [part 1](#) we explore the context in which the classical theorists were writing. [Chapter 2](#) explains how early social theory is shaped by the industrialization and urbanization of nineteenth-century European societies. [Chapter 3](#) examines the intellectual context of early social thought.

In [part 2](#), we examine selective classical social thinkers. [Chapter 4](#) explores the antecedents of Karl Marx's philosophy and methodology. [Chapter 5](#) examines Marx's conception of history, social class, and the role of ideology. [Chapter 6](#) examines Marx's economic analysis of capitalism. [Chapter 7](#) examines how Émile Durkheim's theories differed from those of both Marx and Weber. [Chapter 8](#) looks at Durkheim's rules of sociological method and his theory of suicide. [Chapter 9](#) explains his theories on religion and education. [Chapter 10](#) turns to examine Max Weber's pronouncements on methodology. [Chapter 11](#) extends the coverage of Weber's sociology to examine his metanarrative around rationalization in Western culture. [Chapter 12](#) examines Weber's theory of legitimate domination and his treatment of class.

[Chapter 13](#) acknowledges the role of early feminists' and women sociologists' scholarship and the genesis of feminist social theory. [Chapter 14](#) examines W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of race and his analysis of the interplay between American capitalism, race, and racism. [Chapter 15](#) examines the work of Georg Simmel with a focus on his theories of sociation and modernity. [Chapter 16](#) examines the work of George Herbert Mead with a focus on Mead's conception of the social self and society.

In [part 3](#), [chapter 17](#) aims to probe connections between class, gender, and race and explore commonalities as well as differences. We ambitiously aim to demonstrate how the analytical perspectives and conceptual tools developed by the classical social theorists presented in this book can be usefully applied to a variety of national contexts and contemporary debates in this age of neoliberalism, rapid technological change, inequality, and existential climate breakdown.

In sum, we argue that the ideas of the classical social theorists continue to be relevant and exert a profound influence on contemporary social scientists. These ideas have the power to help us analyze and understand modern capitalist societies and global capitalism. Indeed, we believe these classics should become part of every citizen's education. We hope that the readers of this book will gain an appreciation of this.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 “Ideas determine whether human creativity works for society or against it,” according to George Monbiot.⁸³ How can the theoretical framework in this chapter help us understand Monbiot’s assertion?
- 2 What is “social theory” and how does theory drive sociological research?
- 3 To what extent is the classical canon a product of White men?

2

Modernity and Social Theory

Self-regulating capitalism gave rise to a specific civilization. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society, opines Karl Polanyi.¹ Classical social theory developed as a response to the advent and the conditions of a specific civilization in Western Europe – industrial capitalism and urbanism, which created unprecedented chaotic change and social upheaval. This great transformation from ancient times occurred over a period of about 135 years between 1776, when Adam Smith published his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* and Louis XVI still ruled France, and around 1914, about ten years after Max Weber first published his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Karl Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation* describes how the powerful English bourgeoisie turned land and labor into “fictitious commodities,” in principle very different from the goods that had previously been exchanged in markets. Polanyi's argument, however, is about much more than technical innovation; he makes the case that the great transformation changed people – by changing the way they viewed the world and their place in it. The historical antecedents of classical social theory can be found in what historian Eric Hobsbawm has called the dual revolution: the British Industrial Revolution (1780–1830) and the French Revolution (1789). This dual Anglo-French revolution cannot be understood without examining conditions many decades before 1780, but such analysis is well beyond the limits of this chapter.

In this chapter we provide a brief account of the history of modernity, which can be seen as the biography of classical social theory, since classical thinkers were living through the great transformational changes that formed the basis of their theorizing.² As they studied modernity, new concepts were formulated to explain the historical changes, and these became integral elements of the works of classical theorists, including concepts such as the division of labor, alienation, anomie, individualization, and urbanization. These concepts reflected an intellectual engagement in the debate about the nature of modernity.

INTERPRETING THE HISTORY OF MODERNITY

Before reviewing Western transformation, we need to highlight some challenges this task presents. Studying social change from a historical perspective and using the word *revolution*, in particular, are problematic for a number of reasons. First, such an exercise involves a compression of time periods and a compression of different modes of social organization. Importantly, we need to avoid presenting the emergence of new social forms as a coherent, orderly, and inevitable process of change. For example, someone looking back from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century might find it reasonable to talk of the emergence of the factory system. However, this development took place sporadically. Many features of paid work in premodernity survived well into the modern era. When compressing the specific into general historical trends, we have to avoid attaching a coherent pattern that is spurious to these changes.³ The second problem is how to separate the empirical developments from the theoretical perspectives within which these developments are organized and located.⁴ History is about interpretation, and much of what follows represents one synthesized account of historical events. How historians assemble and interpret a chosen sample of facts will depend mainly on what methods are chosen, how the data are analyzed, and what kinds of facts are included: “By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants.”⁵ Each of the classical theorists selected and gave prominence to the empirical developments that they found most significant.

Here we give prominence to the immense social upheaval that occurred primarily in Western Europe or, more precisely, in Britain, France, and Germany. This focus is not because the neglected histories of other countries

are less interesting or less important or for reasons of space. Rather, it is because Marx, Wollstonecraft, Martineau, Durkheim, Luxemburg, Simmel, and Weber witnessed firsthand the maelstrom of chaotic social change marked by industrialization and urbanization. In Britain, for example, by 1867, when Marx had completed the first volume of *Capital*, the factory system was well established, and the majority of Britons lived in cities. In Germany and France by 1914, Max and Marianne Weber and Émile Durkheim could observe for themselves the triumph of industrial capitalism and the social effects of urbanization. And in the United States, industrialization gathered apace. By 1899, when Du Bois published *The Philadelphia Negro*, the city of Philadelphia had a working population of over 466,000, had numerous iron and steel-related manufacturing works, most notably the Bethlehem Iron Company, and produced more textiles than any other US city. The urbanization process had also divided the city by class and race, with the White upper class moving to the growing suburbs.

We aim to provide a general historical synthesis, to make sense of the “great” transformation of Western Europe – insofar as it’s reasonable to do so in one chapter – in order to understand how and why European modernity influenced the classical social thinkers that we have chosen to study. Our treatment sketches the processes of industrialization and urbanization largely in Britain, France, and Germany between 1780 and 1914.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

From 1780, the traditional work rhythms and practices of pre-industrial society gave way to those of an industrial society, to a new *modus operandi* of producing goods. We can define the Industrial Revolution as a fundamental change in the structure of the economy in which the capitalists’ pursuit and accumulation of profit guided the mode of organizing work, harnessing technology, and determining the social relations of work. Britain was the classic theater for the transformation of a pre-industrial agrarian economy into an industrialized and urban society. The British Industrial Revolution, which occurred roughly between 1780 and 1830,⁶ was, it is posited, partly due to the interplay with European Enlightenment. The quest for knowledge that defined the Industrial Revolution was inspired by the Enlightenment, captured by Immanuel Kant’s injunction *sapere aude*, or “dare to know,” that inspired inventors and

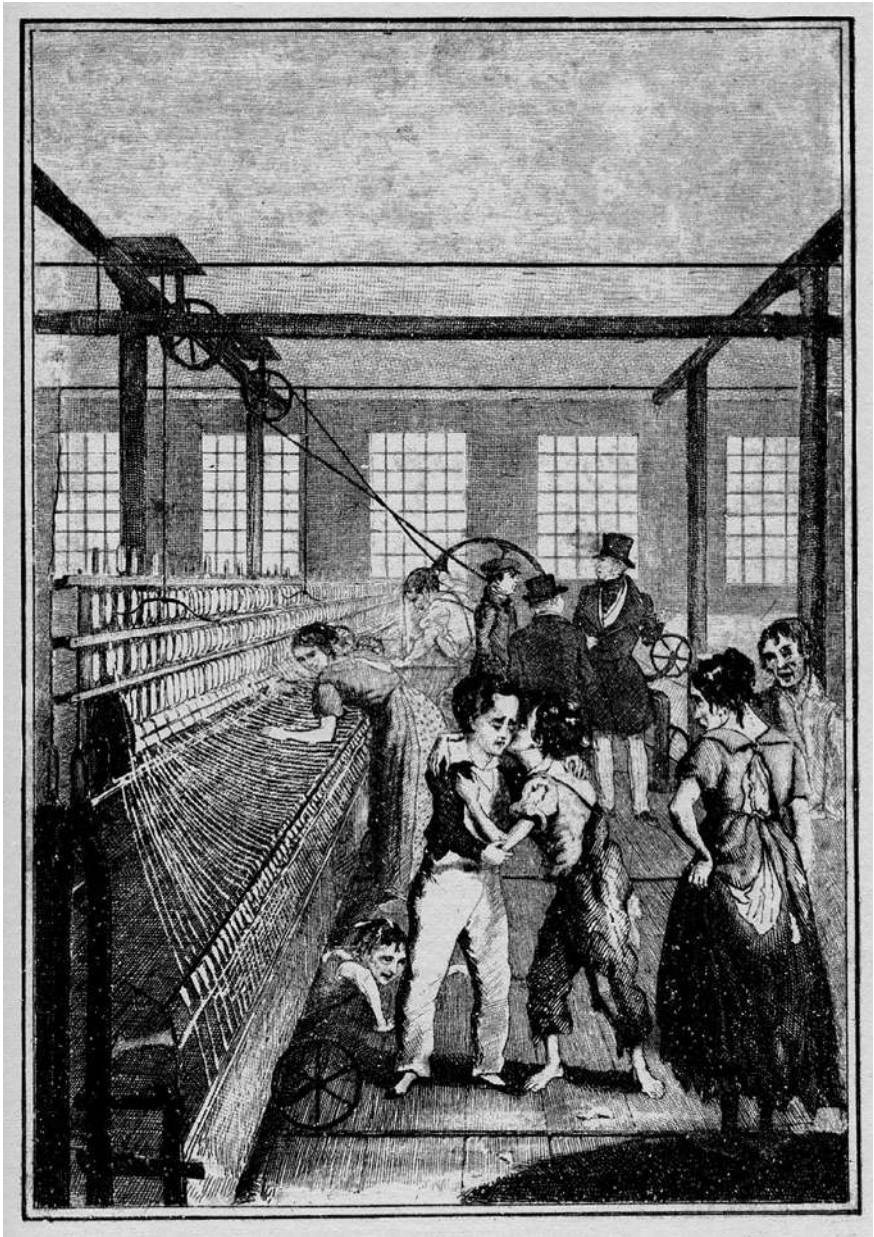


Photo 2.1. The factory was a technological and social transformation of paid work, increasing labor productivity but imposing a routine and discipline quite unlike pre-industrial rhythms of work.

exposed the world to the forces of reason.⁷ In France, the contours of a modern industrial society developed much later, between 1875 and 1914. Germany in 1790 was still essentially a collection of states sharing a common language and, of her population of 23 million, 17 million were engaged in agricultural rather than industrial activity. The German “destitution” was evident when compared with economic developments in England, whose industrial sector economy was already well established, and even when compared to those in France, whose economy was transforming from agriculture to manufacture. Between 1800 and 1848, Germany’s industrial production was rapidly expanding but still small compared to that of England or France. Typical of this expansion were the tripling of metallurgical output, the 50 percent increase in the output of the coal mines between 1800 and 1830, and the construction of 2,500 kilometers of railway tracks between 1835 and 1847. In 1831, Germany’s steam-machine production was still fifty years behind England’s. Some German states did industrialize faster than others. In Rhineland-Westphalia, for example, the province where Karl Marx was born, the prefect of the Ruhr could plausibly claim that it was the most industrial region in Europe.⁸

In the late 1840s, the effect of industrialization in Britain, the effect of the French occupation of the Rhineland, and state support acted as catalysts for social transformation in Germany. The unification of the country by force under Prussian leadership and an atmosphere of exacerbated nationalism gave German industrial capitalism its special character. Large-scale expansion of industry occurred in Germany between 1850 and 1900.⁹ It would be monotonous to quote data on rates of economic growth; suffice to say that, whereas before 1800 virtually the only quantities measured in millions were populations, by 1890 the quantities of iron, steel, and manufactured goods produced in Britain, France, and Germany were measured in such magnitudes. By 1890, Western Europe was the region of advanced capitalism par excellence.

The common features of industrial capitalism are found principally in the economic forces that produce it. First, industrialization involved a more productive use of the factors of production – land, labor, and machinery – partly obtained by introducing new methods of organization to production: the factory, a combination of power technology, specialized machines, and specialized occupations. Before each Industrial Revolution, most manufacturing operated on a small scale, employed labor-intensive methods, and used little fixed capital. The factory was the most striking outward symbol of the new industrial society. Second,

industrialization involved a great increase in the productivity of human labor, in terms of output per head. The factory system provided greater degrees of coordinative and controlling power to the capitalist factory owner. The significance of the concentration of workers lay in the potential for increasing labor productivity by extending the division of labor and installing machines. The factory offered the opportunity to innovate: "The very division of labour ... prepared the ground from which mechanical invention could eventually spring."¹⁰ Third, industrialization required the existence of a reserve army of free labor, the people able and willing to work for wages because they had no other adequate means of support. As we shall explain, the effects of agricultural reforms and population growth created a large pool of cheap labor as people migrated to the new industrial towns.

The role of technology within the factory system has been long debated. In *Capital*, Karl Marx's analysis of the industrial division of labor emphasizes how the process enabled the capitalist to control work processes in ways that were not possible with the traditional domestic, or putting-out, system.¹¹ Pre-industrial methods made it difficult for entrepreneurs to monitor and control the quantity and quality of the work performed by cottage-based workers because "the domestic weaver or craftsman was master of his time, starting and stopping when he desired."¹² The factory system enabled owners to control the pace and quality of work by means of the "discipline of mechanization" – the actual speed of the machine – new techniques, and the hierarchy of direct supervisory control over the workforce. Further, echoing Karl Polanyi's argument, the system demanded a new mentality toward work, one favorable to the inexorable demands of factory rationality. Over several generations, workers were taught the values of punctuality, obedience, and self-discipline: "by fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings, and schoolings; the suppression of fairs and sports – new labour habits were formed, and a new time-discipline was imposed."¹³ For Marx, as we will explain, the industrial division of labor and its concomitant capitalist relations of production are the prime movers of conflict and social change.

Economic historians have long debated the role of the state in the transition from early modern to modern capitalist society. The role of the state, which Marx famously summarizes as "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie,"¹⁴ was central to the process of industrialization. European capitalism depended on a new state apparatus to provide a business-friendly environment: free markets,

business laws and regulations, currency control, and, if necessary, defense of commercial interests. In Britain the old Corn Laws, with which the agrarian interests sought to protect farming, were abolished in 1846. To create the most favorable conditions for industrial capital, the British Parliament abolished the fixing of minimum wages. A precondition of the new industrial model was a large supply of labor. Recognizing that a reservoir of free labor is a prerequisite for modern capitalism, Weber writes, "Persons must be present who are not only legally in a position, but are also economically compelled, to sell their labour on the market without restriction.... The development of capitalism is impossible, if such a propertyless stratum is absent, a class compelled to sell its labour services to live; ... Rational capitalistic calculation is possible only ... where ... workers ... under the compulsion of the whip of hunger, offer themselves."¹⁵ In his classic study *The Condition of the Working Class*, published in 1845 in German, Friedrich Engels discusses the laws of capitalist competition:

The worker is, in law and in fact, the slave of the property-holding class, so effectually a slave that he is sold like a piece of goods, rises and falls in value like a commodity. If the demand for workers increases, the price of workers rises; if it falls, their price falls. If it falls so greatly that a number of them become unsaleable, if they are left in stock, they are simply left idle; and as they cannot live upon that, they die of starvation.... The only difference as compared with the old, outspoken slavery is this, that the worker of today seems to be free because he is not sold once and for all, but piecemeal by the day, the week, the year, and because no one owner sells him to another, but he is forced to sell himself in this way instead, being the slave of no particular person, but of the whole property-holding class.¹⁶

The state is of crucial importance in the workings of capitalism, not only as a major customer of private enterprise (e.g., warships, aircraft, and armaments) but also, in the case of Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twenty-first, because of its readiness to protect business interests with military force. The triumph of British capitalism was achieved, as Eric Hobsbawm notes, "very largely because of the unswerving readiness of British governments to back their businessmen by ruthless and aggressive economic discrimination and open war against all possible rivals."¹⁷ In Western Europe, state intervention supported the birth and growth of capitalism to the extent

that it eventually became impossible not to be unaffected by the state's power and interventions in every aspect of modern life.¹⁸

Some of the classical social thinkers actually witnessed a double transformation in the structure and *modus operandi* of industrial capitalism.¹⁹ On the one hand, they saw by 1890 the concentration of capital, the emergence of big business and monopolies. On the other hand, they observed the systematic attempt to rationalize production and manage business enterprises by applying new techniques as a means of achieving absolute efficiency. The American Frederick W. Taylor (1856–1915) pioneered the so-called scientific management approach to industrial work; hence, the term *Taylorism* represents both a set of management practices and a system of ideological assumptions.²⁰ The centerpiece of Taylorism includes both the separation of tasks into their simplest constituent elements, the “routinization of work,” and the transferring of all decision-making functions to managers. Henry Ford, the famed American industrialist, applied the major principles of Taylorism in his Detroit car plant, but he also added two important technologies: the assembly line and the stopwatch. The assembly line involved a continuous moving track with work tasks, numbers of machines, number of workers, and its speed determined by the steps necessary to mass-produce the Ford Model T (1908–27) automobile. The stopwatch was used to calculate the time to complete each work assignment. Ever-greater job fragmentation, shorter task-cycle times, and the ratcheting-up of the speed of the assembly line intensified the pace of work, causing detachment, fatigue, and burnout. In 1922, Ford described his approach to time management: “The idea is that the man ... must have every second necessary but not a single unnecessary second.”²¹ By the use of measurable goals, fragmentation of tasks, and use of the stopwatch to time the completion of those tasks, managers gained ever more control over workers’ performance. This form of work organization is called *Fordism*: an inhuman regime satirized by Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times*. The inherent problems associated with Taylorism and Fordism – alienation and industrial strikes – became a rich source of sociological inquiry in the twentieth century.

We have already noted that the canonical writers were, by and large, oblivious to the issue of gender (and race). In Western Europe, early industrial capitalism absorbed huge numbers of working-class women and children into the new factories, and this had a rapid effect on public attitudes toward gender roles and patterns of family life. As historians Annette Timm and Joshua Sanborn point out, European industrialization

changed not only how people earned money and how they worked but also how they related to others socially and sexually.²² Gender-based patterns of work and gender inequality were soon omnipresent in European capitalism. The factory owner's need for cheap labor provided new opportunities for working-class women to do paid work. In the later period of industrialization, the 1880s, large-scale food-processing factories and bakeries were female dominated. Emerging stereotypes reinforced the belief that work and family life were two separate spheres: "images ... depicted men as naturally suited to the highly competitive nineteenth-century workplace and women as too delicate for the world of commerce."²³

Did industrial capitalism segregate home from work and allocate women to the former and men to the latter? Space doesn't allow us to address this question fully, but the evidence suggests that gender-based patterns of work predate modernity: they are socially constructed and not the result of capitalist-induced social change.²⁴ Work tended to be labeled female or male on the basis of socially changeable expectations of how to view, judge, and treat the two sexes. Enduring patterns of gender inequality at work can be partially explained by the activities of trade unions. According to one union leader, the object of a trade union is "to bring about a condition ... where wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world."²⁵ Historian Stephanie Coontz argues that whenever women undertake paid work in large numbers, certain social processes unfold.²⁶ Women begin to challenge laws and customs that regulate their subordination in the public sphere and within the family. Many working-class women became early supporters and activists in the trade unions and in the women's rights movement. Working women also begin to marry later and have fewer children, especially when they have access to education and attain higher-paying careers.

The issue of gender roles and gender inequality at work remains a complex one, but there is no doubt that the case for equality was undermined by the notion of the "breadwinner's wage."²⁷ James Connolly, the Scottish socialist leader and a proto feminist, executed in 1916 by the British state for his part in the Easter Rising in Dublin, Ireland, expressed a minority view in the labor movement. He wrote, "The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of the slave."²⁸ The general prevailing opinion meant that, throughout

the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, large numbers of working-class and middle-class women were effectively excluded from many trade and professional occupations, while men used patriarchal strategies to defend skill and profession as male property.²⁹

URBANIZATION

The most obvious symbol of the new industrial society was not only the factory but also its inescapable attendant urbanization. Industrialization required low-cost housing for the new urban working class, transportation services, and financial institutions. At the heart of the question about the social effects of industrial capitalism is the disjuncture between pre-industrial and industrial labor. Factory labor imposed a regularity and monotony quite unlike pre-industrial rhythms of work, and labor increasingly took place in cities, which prevented any means of supplementing family income, for example, by growing food. The new manufacturing cities grew exponentially. In Britain in 1750, there were only two cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants: London and Edinburgh. In 1851, there were 29, including 9 cities with over 100,000. In 1831, the industrial city of Manchester had 238,000 inhabitants; Leeds had 123,000; Liverpool, 202,000; and Glasgow, 193,000. The growth of industrial cities was caused by both the general growth of population and the uprooting of people from rural areas. Census returns show the extent of the migration. In 1851, fewer than 50 percent of inhabitants of Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow had been born in these cities. London increased from 2.5 million in 1851 to 3.9 million in 1881; Paris from 1 million in 1849 to 1.9 million in 1875; and Berlin increased from 378,000 in 1848 to 1.6 million in 1888. With the rapid growth of cities came the most appalling standards of urban squalor known in nineteenth-century Britain. Still, urban conditions have to be related to their context before they can be evaluated. Public services—clean water supply, sanitation, street cleaning, and public spaces—were nonexistent or of very poor standard before industrialization began. Comparisons must begin from here, not from twenty-first-century standards. Traditional living practices that were appropriate to the conventions and conditions of a pre-industrial society were carried into the new context, where the sheer numbers of people and the speed of urban development brutalized and degraded the older practices, which then appeared even more brutal and appalling in the new urban environment.

Geography – proximity to minerals, water, ports – may have been a determining factor dictating the location of cities, but within this modernizing current, it was powerful social elites who built the cities in such a fashion that they met their economic and social wants.³⁰ The traditional modernist framing of the city as the quintessential site of capitalist energy and ingenuity fails to recognize that cities were the site of “consolidated capital.” A critical alternative narrative presents the city as the outcome of “historical processes of possession and dispossession,” with the urban landscape zoned according to the wealth of the inhabitants, which denoted class and racial segregation and inequality.³¹

Cities grew rapidly in an unplanned, laissez-faire atmosphere, and they provided only the most basic public services, not to mention affordable housing. Air pollution and water pollution caused mass epidemics of contagious disease, notably cholera and typhoid, which swept through extensive nineteenth-century European working-class enclaves, creating the European division of the “good” west end and a “poor” east end of large cities. The forces of capital accumulation shaped both the working conditions and living conditions of the urban working class, binding them to one another in everyday life and congealing a sense of class identity and interests. Developers and builders constructed railways into the city centers, preferably through the urban slums where real estate costs were low. Most working-class people rented accommodation in high-density, low-quality tenement houses, typically consisting of one or two rooms only. For the city’s powerful social elite, the working-class enclaves were public health hazards. It was only after 1850, when epidemics spread from the slums and began to kill the rich also, and after mass agitation that systematic urban planning and rebuilding were undertaken.

Reflective contemporaries did not deny that the new cities were cauldrons of appalling squalor and misery. In Britain, successive royal commissions, contemporary literature, and individual studies provided empirical evidence of working-class conditions. In 1835, the French liberal Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of Manchester, “From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilization works its miracles, and civilized man is turned almost into a savage.”³² Friedrich Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class* is a trenchant

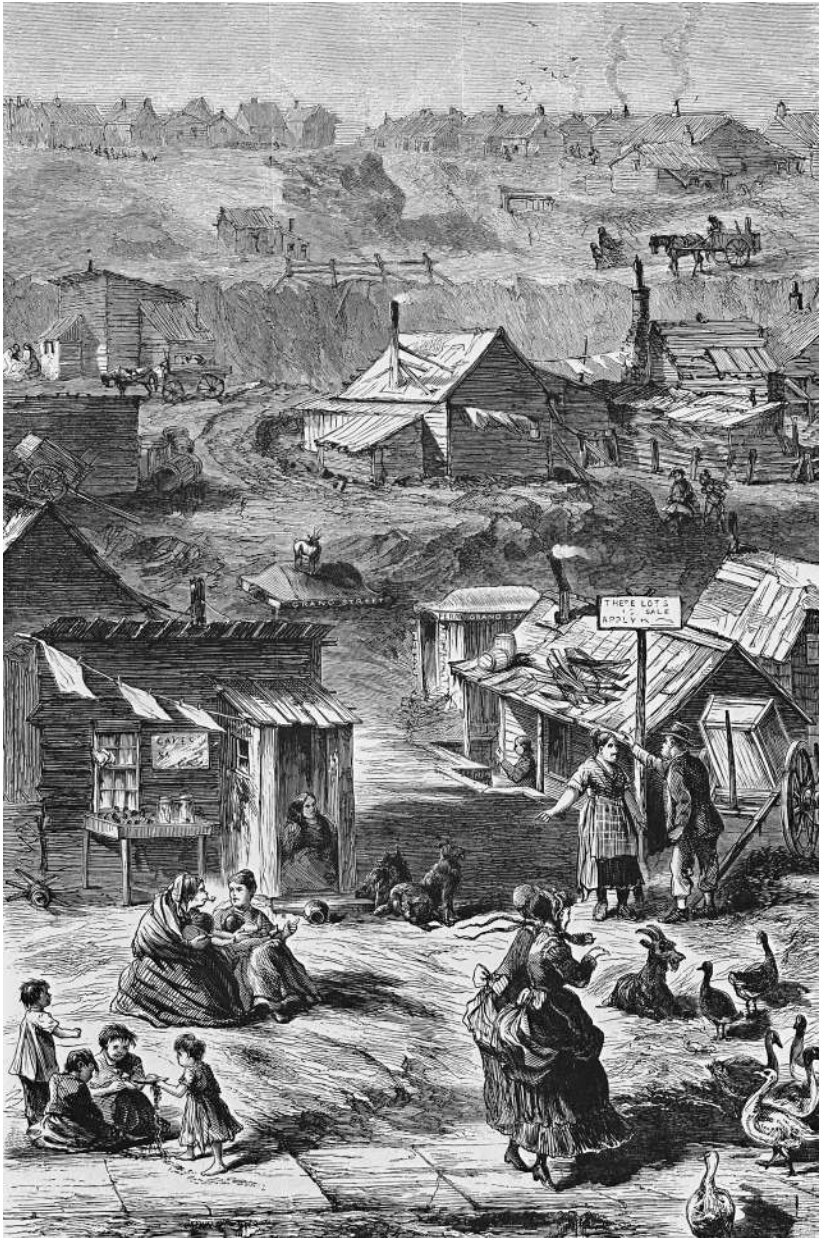


Photo 2.2. This illustration shows an encampment ghetto near Central Park, New York City, 1869. The majority of the working class had to live in squalid conditions. Ghettos and slums generated a sense of common status, common condition, and hence a common identity.

account of the filth and squalor of working-class housing: “Every great city has one or more slums, where the working class is crowded together.... The houses are occupied from cellar to garret, filthy within and without, and their appearance is such that no human being could possibly wish to live in them.”³³ Describing the area of Manchester southwest of the city center and known as “Little Ireland,” Engels writes in even more repugnant detail:

Masses of refuse, offal and sickening filth lie among standing pools in all directions; the atmosphere is poisoned by the effluvia from these, and laden and darkened by the smoke of a dozen tall factory chimneys. A horde of ragged women and children swarm about here, as filthy as the swine that thrive upon the garbage heaps and in the puddles.... The race that lives in these ruinous cottages ... must really have reached the lowest stage of humanity.³⁴

These social conditions were accompanied by the increasing atomization of peoples, and the migration of large masses unanchored from stable social groups fundamentally changed the social structure. Not only did the new urban working class live in squalid urban enclaves, but also for those undertaking waged work, their relationship with their capitalist employer was constituted by monetary transactions – a cash nexus. And the social divide between the urban rich and poor classes widened. Writing about Manchester, viewed as the symbol of modernity,³⁵ a clergyman in the 1840s wrote: “There is no town in the world where the distance between the rich and poor is so great, or the barrier between them so difficult to cross.”³⁶ But the city was not merely emblematic of the laboring classes’ exclusion from human society; for them, it was a social catastrophe. As a corollary to this, distinctive patterns of social norms and behavior that characterize a modern industrial society became firmly established in industrialized Western Europe as early as the 1850s. As historian Eric Hobsbawm remarks, cities allowed for the formation of the “urban villages” in which work life and social life became entwined, and in which new social movements and labor strength rested.³⁷ In *The Class Matrix*, critical social theorist Vivek Chibber examines the urban process through a class lens and makes an insightful observation that the rise of working-class ghettos contributed to the growing sense of common status, common condition, and

hence a common identity among its inhabitants.³⁸ Further, fast-paced urban life based on economic rationality, individualism, and a secular worldview gave people a strong sense that they were living in a new age of constant change. As most introductory sociology texts explain, this experience provoked much contemporary discussion on the distinction between traditional and modern societies, a discourse formalized in the celebrated work of the nineteenth-century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), who distinguished the foundations of rural and small-town community life – what he called *Gemeinschaft* – from the foundations of large-city life, which he called *Gesellschaft*.

The clash between, on the one hand, the pervasive influence of religion and the moral economy of the past and, on the other, the principle of self-interest and the rationality of the present was particularly apparent in the realm of social behavior and welfare. The spending habits appropriate to rural life increased social problems when translated into the new high-density urban environment. In the city, the wage is the industrial family's sole protection against starvation and destitution, dependent as it is on the vicissitudes of the market. In contrast, although poverty among agricultural laborers was common, money did not usually have such unique importance for agricultural families, who had the opportunity to supplement their income by growing food. In urban centers, when higher wages were fed into traditional spending habits, greater social problems resulted.³⁹ Laissez-faire industrialization and an urban life based on money exchange exacerbated existing problems of alcoholism, infanticide, crime, prostitution, and suicide.⁴⁰

The urban bourgeoisie, supported by the maxims of liberal economics and utilitarian philosophy, believed that the rational man must make provision for accident, illness, and old age. The social mechanism of the new society was in the profoundest manner inhuman and inequitable, and it left an indelible mark on the emerging discipline of sociology. As the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm convincingly explains, the British Poor Law Act of 1834, which made all welfare less than the lowest wage offered in the market, forcibly separated husbands, wives, and children into institutionalized workhouses in order to punish the poor for being destitute. Yet the fissure between the rich and poor classes grew wider and “the poor suffered because the rich benefited.”⁴¹ In France and Germany, despotic employers with a strong Catholic and paternalist tradition did, at least, partly offset the inherently insecure factory

employment by providing education and welfare. The social relations of Britain's new industrial cities determined the pattern of social movements, as we shall soon discuss. As early as 1819, the year of the "massacre of Peterloo,"⁴² *The Times* of London reported on the discontent of the Manchester working classes: "Their wretchedness seems to madden them against the rich, who they dangerously imagine engross the fruits of their labour without having any sympathy for their wants."⁴³ The development of classical social theory is inextricably tied to this debate about the social effects of urbanization.

DEMOCRATIZATION

European industrial capitalism developed predominantly under the influence of the British Industrial Revolution; however, the French Revolution shaped its ideologies and greatly affected the processes of democratization.⁴⁴ In mid-seventeenth-century England, the Leveller movement represented the aspirations of the working poor and campaigned for land reform, democracy, and equality.⁴⁵ By the 1790s, democracy was understood as uncontrolled popular power. Edmund Burke expressed the orthodox contemporary view that "a perfect democracy was the most shameful thing in the world."⁴⁶ Democracy was still considered a revolutionary term even in the 1850s. Only when it became defined in terms of the liberal tradition of open elections of representatives did it gain wide acceptance. The French Revolution helped spur the process of democratization. On July 14, 1789, the Bastille, a state prison symbolizing the absolute authority of Louis XVI, was captured, and by August the revolution had acquired its manifesto, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The French Revolution inspired radical reform across Europe and ancient civilizations. It was "the first great movement of ideas in Western Christendom that had any real effect on the world of Islam."⁴⁷ Revolutions in nineteenth-century Europe were caused largely by the struggle both for and against the principles of 1789.

In his book, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848*, Hobsbawm argues that the French Revolution emerged because of the conflict between the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI and the rising new social forces represented by the middle classes. The bourgeoisie wanted to build a new

society according to the maxims of reason and liberal economics. The ideology of the French Revolution, found in the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, is, in essence, a manifesto against the old hierarchical society of aristocratic privilege, as two of its tenets evince: “men are born and live free and equal under the laws” and “all citizens have a right to cooperate in the formation of the law.”⁴⁸ In Hobsbawm’s view, these ideals are rooted in classical liberalism as formulated by such philosophers as Charles-Louis de Sécondat, Baron de Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and by the Scottish moral philosopher and liberal political economist Adam Smith.⁴⁹ The leaders of classical liberalism believed in constitutionalism, an enlightened monarchy, and a secular state with civil liberties, guarantees for private enterprise, and a government representing taxpayers and property owners. A second revolution of 1792, the “Jacobin Revolution,” inspired the dream of “equality, liberty, and fraternity,” and the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821).

From 1792 until 1850, Europe experienced almost continual war and three waves of revolution. The first wave occurred in 1820–4, which saw uprisings in Spain and Italy (1820) and Greece (1821). The second wave occurred in 1829–34 and 1837–42 and was confined to Western Europe, with uprisings in Britain, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the East European state of Poland. A third wave of revolution broke out in France, Germany, and Italy in 1848, the same year in which Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* was published. In London, a mass demonstration marched to Parliament to demand universal male suffrage. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the state, the power holders of finance, and the big industrialists in Britain, France, and Germany were anxious to prevent revolution on the French Jacobin model. In Germany, the liberalism of England was more of a model than that of France. Radical ideas were confined to groups of German intellectuals, of which the most prominent was the Young Hegelians.⁵⁰ It was not until the 1880s that political oligarchs were seriously challenged by the agitations of the labor movement of trade unions and working-class political parties.

The French Revolution and industrial capitalism gave rise to another phenomenon of modernity: nationalism. In the literature of the politics of nationalism, the concept of national identity is often treated as the outcome of capitalist expansion, a development resulting from

the pressure of industrial society to produce a large, centrally educated, culturally homogeneous population.⁵¹ Nationalism helped create the notion that people share a collective history and destiny, expressed in the formulation by social elites of shared values and common narratives about the national past and national interests. In the new industrial age, nationalism was a powerful social force in giving the people in advanced capitalist countries a strong sense of culture and social identity. The social experience of those most affected by industrial capitalism was moderated by the “imagined community” of the nation-state. Each nationalist movement tended to justify its principal concern with its own nation. Following the three waves of revolution in Europe, nation building and mass nationalism became important features of European politics.

Mass nationalism was pivotal to capitalist growth.⁵² As the British, Belgian, French, and German economies expanded, nationalism helped give rise to a modern global system of “racial capitalism” dependent upon colonialism, slavery, and violence.⁵³ In simple terms, colonialism refers to the economic, political, social, and cultural domination of Indigenous Peoples by an outside foreign power. The long reign of the British Empire over parts of Africa, India, and North America is an example of colonialism. The same can be said of German rule over parts of East and West Africa and French rule over parts of North Africa. The roots of Western racism took hold in European civilization well before the dawn of the British Industrial Revolution. It was in the West that the “Negro” was first manufactured and, by extension, another fabrication was created, that of the superiority of White European nations, governed by superior moral and religious beliefs (according to the ideas of “scientific racism,” at least) and by European rule of law, and composed of literate citizens and inventors of superior technology. These constructions helped justify colonial expansion and enslavement in those territories deemed to be lawless, illiterate, and inferior. The close relationship among capitalist development, the social construction of race, slavery, and colonialism is complex.⁵⁴ But, in Hobsbawm’s view, “it is undeniable that the pressure of capital in search of more profitable investment ... contributed to policies of expansion – including colonial conquest.”⁵⁵

In Western Europe, the confluence of economic and political forces created the conditions out of which the tensions arose that contributed to the origins of World War I (1914–18). The German industrialists

wanted access to international markets for their increasing productive capacity, which only an expansionist foreign policy and colonialism could give. An expansionist foreign policy brought the demand for building a German navy. The economic development of Germany cannot be separated from the politics of colonialism and nationalism.⁵⁶ Ideas about colonial backwardness and inferiority when compared with Europe were buttressed by social science. Economists justified colonial expansion through theories of economic growth predicated on the international division of labor, and second-order Darwinism spuriously accounted for the division of races into advanced and backward.

England was not only the birthplace of industrial capitalism but also the cradle of new mass social movements. Disenchantment with the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism gave rise to the Chartist movement, trade unions, and working-class political parties. The fundamental demand of Chartism was political reform, principally universal male suffrage. Universal female suffrage was never asked for or conceded. In explaining the rise of the working-class Chartist movement in the 1830s, Robert George Gammage wrote in 1854, "It is the existence of great social wrongs which principally teaches the masses the value of political rights."⁵⁷ For centuries before 1790, popular uprisings of one kind or another had challenged local employers and power holders. But, between the 1780s and the 1830s, mass popular politics gave voice to ordinary people on a wide range of social issues and took several forms: mass national demonstrations, petitions, public statements, and the lobbying of members of Parliament. The denial of universal suffrage for the working classes reinforced the sense of economic injustice emanating from the working conditions of the time. As Chibber argues, political and economic injustice instilled "a sense within the [working] class that the system was entirely captured by the propertied classes, for the same people who dominated them in the workplace also passed the laws of the state."⁵⁸ Participants and observers alike recognized the maturity of the sporadic surges of political militancy: a transition from relatively parochial to national popular politics. Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* best captures the significance of this new political phenomenon: "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority."⁵⁹



Photo 2.3. Marking the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave some women the right to vote for the first time. UK-wide processions were held, and this image shows two participants at the Edinburgh event.

The British Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution profoundly changed the relative political power of the social classes. As industrial capitalism expanded, the ascendancy of the middle classes became manifest, as did the downward tendency of the aristocracy. War-driven taxation and debt increased Parliament's power and compelled the aristocracy to make concessions: To wage a war against the French Republic, it is argued, the British aristocracy "threw themselves into the arms of the monied class."⁶⁰ The Reform Act of 1832 enfranchised the British middle strata, and was the first example in Europe of an *ancien régime* acquiescing peacefully to the forces of constitutional democracy.⁶¹ After campaigning alongside the bourgeoisie to achieve their own political emancipation, working-class reformers believed that the middle class would campaign in and outside Parliament for the extension of reform to include at least all adult males in the franchise. The fact that the newly enfranchised middle

class did not champion working-class rights became known as the great betrayal.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the growing disaffection of the poor was universal in Europe. In Britain, the Chartists under the *People's Charter* united the working classes around six points of political reform: universal male suffrage, the secret ballot, payment of members of Parliament, the abolition of property qualifications for MPs, equal electoral districts, and annual parliaments. The Chartists were not a revolutionary movement; they demanded inclusion in the political system, not its abolition. Their program of reforms gradually passed into the acts of Parliament. As late as 1880, Britain's Queen Victoria opposed political

reform. She declared with emphasis that she “*cannot* and will not be Queen of a *democratic monarchy*.”⁶² The British Labour Party, backed by trade unions and inspired by socialist ideology, was firmly established in 1914. In Britain, after decades of mass demonstrations, physical abuse by police, and the imprisonment and force-feeding of some leading activists, women secured the vote in 1918 – for those over 30 who owned property and then, in 1928, for all women over 21, well behind the Nordic countries and ex-colonies Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.⁶³ In France and Germany, the survival and prosperity of substantial sections of the peasantry retarded the development of working-class political movements in a way that was dissimilar to the British experience. In the first half of the nineteenth century, French and German intellectual reformers were not interested in organizing mass political agitation.⁶⁴

From the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, industrial conflict was further transformed as working-class collective action progressed from machine breaking – commonly referred to as Luddism – to unionism and organized strikes. Until 1824, workers had no legal rights to organize unions to improve their working conditions. British trade unionism first developed among skilled male workers – the “aristocracy of labor.” In 1851, for example, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) had a membership of almost 12,000, large enough to compel employers to negotiate improvements to their working conditions. Leaders campaigned for the legal recognition of unions, which was granted by the Trade Unions Act of 1871.⁶⁵ The years following the 1880s saw a significant growth of trade unionism among unskilled workers. This “new unionism” represented an ideological and political “sharp turn to the left.”⁶⁶ The *raison d’être* of trade unionism was, as it remains today, to secure through collective negotiation better terms for the sale of labor power. Exclusionary practices against working-class women persisted, however, and unionism largely remained the preserve of male workers throughout the nineteenth century. The limits of English working-class radicalism were further evident in Anglo-Saxon chauvinism, a racial ideology shared across class lines that allowed the English middle classes to rationalize the low wages given to Irish workers, and even to condone the great exploitation and brutality of the non-European population.⁶⁷

CRITICISM

Mainstream interpretations of European and North American economic history undertheorize the role of imperialism and racial ideology in the growth of capitalism and urbanization. As the British, French, and German economies expanded, the exploitation of colonial territories and racialized subjects became increasingly crucial to capital accumulation and gave rise to a modern global system of “racial capitalism” dependent upon slavery, violence, race, and racism. In his book *Empire-land*, Sathnam Sanghera contends that Britain’s contemporary multiculturalism is largely the consequence of Britain once having colonized a quarter of the world. The exploitation of the empire made social elites extremely rich, enabled capitalism to grow, and helped certain cities to expand exponentially. Not least, the economic importance of imperialism is reflected in the privileged position of the City of London, as one of the world’s major financial centers. The empire financed the growth of cities such as Liverpool, Bristol, and Glasgow. By 1740, thirty-three slave ships per year set sail from Liverpool. Bristol sent fifty slave ships to Africa each year between 1728 and 1732, transporting more than 100,000 enslaved Africans. Glasgow, the “second city of empire,” was built on wealth from its links to the tobacco trade and slavery: “British banks financed the slave economy,” writes Sanghera.⁶⁸

Racial capitalism is a dynamic mode of organizing the world that operates in particular ways in different contexts.⁶⁹ Moreover, slavery and racism were a necessary precondition for the perpetuation of capitalism, through capitalist practices that rest upon “anti-Blackness” and “Black dehumanization.”⁷⁰ As a corrective to the all too frequent color-blind ideology that permeates early sociology scholarship, critical social theory scholars put race and racism at the core of US urban development. Looking through a racial lens, North American cities are regarded as a product of racialization processes that structure and (re)structure inhabitants and spaces through subjected values, enshrined in capitalist markets, protected by the law, and vigorously defended by the state.⁷¹ It was generally understood by classical social theorists that under capitalism profit and wealth are accumulated through the exploitation of labor. Over the years from 1850 to the 1920s there are a plethora of European and American thinkers that contributed to social theory.

Collectively, however, most neglected to interrogate concepts associated with gendered and racial capitalism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The history of modernity, transformational social changes occurring between 1780 and 1914, can be seen as the biography of classical social theory. The works of the classical theorists we have chosen to study are inextricably bound up with the conditions of modernity. As we have attempted to capture, Europe in 1914 was qualitatively different than it had been in the eighteenth century. It had experienced colossal technological and social transformation in at least three respects. First, economies were no longer predominantly based on agriculture. The large-scale industrial production symbolized by the factory and pioneered by Britain had migrated to the mainland of Europe and North America. In 1848, Britain was the superpower and the “workshop of the world.” Paradoxically, the period between 1780 and 1914, whose claim to have benefited humanity rests on the enormous triumphs of capitalism based on natural science and technology, ended with the new technology of mass-produced machine guns, artillery, and munitions slaughtering millions in the trench warfare of 1914–18. Second, cities developed exponentially. With urbanization, traditional social norms and patterns of human engagement were abandoned, and this changed the relationship between the individual and society: society comprised atomized individuals in the anarchy of competition pursuing only their own self-interest. Third, Western societies were transformed by processes of democratization and the creation of mass national social movements that challenged despotism, the logic of capitalism, and inequality. Working-class emancipation and the institutions of working-class self-defense – the trade unions – had become firmly rooted in Western Europe by 1914.

These are some of the dynamic developments of humanity that the classical social thinkers confronted. It was, simultaneously, a new world of perpetual collapse and renewal, extreme wealth and poverty, individual growth and alienation, liberal democracy and political exclusion, racism and racial exclusion, contradiction, and struggle. In their analysis of modernity, it is well-documented that the majority of classical

theorists were “colorblind” and “genderblind.” They were preoccupied with trying to make sense of the totalizing chaos and with explaining through a White intellectual prism the key characteristics of modernity as contrasted with premodern society. We will explore their works in future chapters, but, before that, we need to examine the intellectual forces that also shaped the theoretical thinking of the founders of sociology.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 Why are the works of the classical social theorists “inextricably bound up with the conditions of modernity”?
- 2 Explain what is meant by “the city is simultaneously the machinery and hero of modernity.”
- 3 Why were large numbers of working-class and middle-class women excluded from many trade and professional occupations in the classical era?

3

European Enlightenment and Early Social Thought

Social theory did not develop in a vacuum. It emerged from a complex set of interlocking philosophical problems and debates that date back to the middle decades of the seventeenth century. In medieval Europe before the Enlightenment, scholastic theories about humankind were dictated by the church and religious ideology. The Church of Rome denounced as a heretic anyone who sought truth independently of the church. Views began to change in the seventeenth century when the educated elite adopted secular ideas to debate the nature of society and the direction it was going or ought to go. It is this unprecedented shift in social discourses, the sets of ideas that together form a powerful body of intellectual thought, which we associate with “Enlightenment.” But the Enlightenment was a pan-European movement with contributions from French, German, and Scottish thinkers, for example. The multifaceted nature of what has come to be known as the Enlightenment, then, refutes the possibility of encapsulating the various streams of thought within a single history.¹ In reality, the intellectual movements cannot be separated from the social movements, and the former were intimately related to modernity. The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, not only emphasized reason and science over superstition and blind faith but also negated all legitimation of monarchy, slavery, and woman’s subordination to man. Thus, the Enlightenment was a cultural tsunami that swept across Western Europe and presaged “a breakthrough in critical consciousness.”² It is therefore of immense importance for understanding the rise of modernity and social theory.³

In this chapter, we provide a brief and selective survey of the core ideas of the European Enlightenment to gain some insight into the philosophies that engaged the classical social theorists examined in this book. The start date of this synthesis, 1648, marked the beginning of a secularization of knowledge. The end date, 1789, witnessed the French Revolution. The chapter examines the ideas of key Enlightenment thinkers under three thematic headings that interlock and, in many cases, overlap: epistemology, human nature and civil society, and emancipation. The chapter then proceeds to discuss the conservative reaction to Enlightenment ideals and the effects of these discourses on early sociology.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Any coverage of the European Enlightenment that fails to acknowledge its antecedents within the centuries of other intellectual thinkers would be misleading. Enlightenment thinkers were conscious of their debt to the past and, at the same time, aware of the uniqueness of their own historical moment as an age of critique, reassessment, and transformation.⁴

The ancient Greeks speculated on the nature of society. *Republic* by Plato (c. 427–347 BCE)⁵ describes an organic social division of labor. And *Politics* by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) contains one of the first attempts to analyze systematically different forms of government – tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. In the two centuries dating from 1400 to 1600, European intellectuals and artists developed an interest in the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. This interest sparked what has come to be known as the Renaissance, a movement originating in Italy and extending progressively to the rest of Europe that cultivated “a spirit of enthusiastic inquiry” in the fields of the arts, architecture, literature, philosophy, and politics.⁶ However, neither ancient Greek philosophers nor Renaissance intellectuals conceptualized society as something distinct from government or the state. The crucial notion of society as a general and abstract concept had to await the Enlightenment.⁷

What is the Enlightenment? In *The Enlightenment*, Dorinda Outram observes that the answer to this question is nearly as important as the question “What is truth?”⁸ Since the seventeenth century, there have been many attempts to define the *European Enlightenment*.



Photo 3.1. Designed by Charles-Nicolas Cochin, the frontispiece of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (subtitled in English *A Reasoned Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Trades*) embodies one of the most common interpretations of the term *Enlightenment*. It depicts Reason and Philosophy pulling away the veil from Truth, while clouds withdraw to open the sky to light. Imagination (left) offers Truth a garland on behalf of all the Arts and Sciences.

The Prussian Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) famously wrote, “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage,”⁹ and his injunction *sapere aude* – “dare to know” and have the courage to use your own reason – inspired inventors and philosophers alike. In the twentieth century, Ernst Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*¹⁰ implies that Enlightenment refers to a desire for human action to be guided by rationality rather than by faith, superstition, or revelation. Written in the immediate aftermath of World War II (1939–45), Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is far less positive.¹¹ The authors argue that at the heart of the Enlightenment lurks political terror in the form of “rational” technological systems utilized to assure mass death in the Holocaust.

In the twenty-first century, there is still no scholarly consensus about which intellectual projects should be given preference. For some, such as Peter Gay, the European Enlightenment represents a unified body of thought developed around the core principle of reason, and it is the basis for human progress.¹² Similarly, for Irving Zeitlin, the Enlightenment is about the advancement of humanity and ever-greater degrees of freedom through “reason and science.”¹³ For Outram, the Enlightenment is best seen as “a series of interlocking, and sometimes warring problems and debates,” where intellectual projects changed society and government on a worldwide basis.¹⁴ In relation to social discourses on Christianity and Islam, some contemporary scholars posit that the Enlightenment is an embodiment of Western cultural imperialism. The Enlightenment was a pan-European phenomenon and was preeminently a movement of ideas. We next consider some of these ideas as they relate to the development of social theory.

EPISTEMOLOGY: RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

The significance of the European Enlightenment for the evolution of social theory lies in large part in the Enlightenment’s philosophical trait of rationality and in the secular conceptualization of society and human progress as objective, collective forces. Philosophers ask questions about knowledge: How is knowledge acquired, and how reliable is knowledge? Such questions are known as *epistemology* or the theory of knowledge. Rationality refers to a philosophical doctrine that gives

primacy to the a priori (deductive) method of reasoning in the process of developing knowledge. Rationalism assumes that the human mind is the sole source of truth and hence must reject faith as a source of truth. As such, it is opposed to empiricism, which is an epistemological doctrine that gives primacy to the a posteriori (inductive) method of reasoning to arrive at general truths, which are derived from experience, observation, or experiments.

Historically, rationalism is embodied in the works of two prominent seventeenth-century philosophers, Descartes and Spinoza. The French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) is often regarded as the originator of the rationalist method, and he had an important influence on early Enlightenment thinking. Descartes argues that strict deductive reasoning must be the only source of knowledge. In his 1641 *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes sets out the conditions necessary for something to be knowledge. He posits that, like the structure of a building, knowledge must rest upon secure foundations, and this foremost principle is based on self-consciousness: “I exist, simply because I am able to doubt my existence.” All things that we can conceive of clearly and distinctly exist. In establishing self-consciousness as the basis of absolute certainty, Descartes rejects faith as a possible source of truth and celebrates the universal power of human reason.¹⁵ Cartesian philosophy is part materialist and part idealist: the human is a machine but has a soul. Benedictus (Baruch) de Spinoza (1632–77) attracted notoriety in early Enlightenment Europe because he was the chief progenitor of the medieval Christian doctrine of revelation.¹⁶ In his 1674 *Ethics*, Spinoza conceives the reality of the universe both as the sum of all facts and as the ordering principle that determines the relationship of all those facts in the whole.¹⁷ In other words, all things that exist, exist necessarily and are modes of thought and extension. For Spinoza, reason in humans is akin to reason in nature; one order permeates everything. Reason enables rational human beings to understand themselves and the totality of the universe: it is the key to all of life.¹⁸ The underlying assumption of Spinoza’s philosophy is that reality and concept coincide, so relations between ideas correspond exactly to relations in reality. Spinoza’s materialist philosophy had the potential of producing a revolutionary ideology, which may be seen as a precursor of Marx’s historical materialism.

Empiricism, which is an epistemological doctrine that gives primacy to the a posteriori method of reasoning, is most famously associated with the writings of Sir Isaac Newton, John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. The English mathematician Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) believed in the importance of data based on experience and observation. In *Opticks* (1704), he persuasively puts his case for “experimental philosophy”:

As in mathematics, so in natural philosophy, the investigation of difficult things by the method of analysis ought ever to precede the method of compositions. This analysis consists of making experiments and observations, and in drawing general conclusions from them by induction.¹⁹

Like Newton, John Locke (1632–1704) and the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) emphasize the pivotal role of experience in all human understanding and knowledge. Locke’s 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* provides the epistemological foundations of modern empiricism. An *idea*, according to Locke, is “whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks.”²⁰ Locke acknowledges that, sometimes, humans conceive of things outside their life experience. He asserts that when ideas do not appear to connect directly to experience, they are in fact fabricated by some kind of extrapolation from the ideas that are based upon sensory experience.²¹ In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), David Hume avers empiricism, and his radical approach involved him in deconstructing the identity of the self: “The true idea of the human mind is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences which are linked together by a relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other.”²²

The celebrated German thinker Immanuel Kant, arguably one of the most influential philosophers of the European Enlightenment, established his international reputation through his trilogy of critiques.²³ His seminal treatise on epistemology is found in the first of these, his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he asks what can be known by a priori reasoning. Although concurring with empiricists such as Locke and Hume that there are no innate ideas, he did not accept that all knowledge could be derived solely from sense experience, which imprints impressions on the human mind. To understand the phenomenal world, humans have to rely upon their own inherent logic and concepts, such as causation, that enable us to make sense of the natural world. The human mind is

equipped with several categories of understanding, including cause and effect, which are not learned from sense experience. To Kant, the order of the natural world and the laws of nature are not then inherent in nature but are human *constructs* imposed upon it by human minds. The works of Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, and Kant offer an overview of the debate on the epistemological question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable scientific knowledge. The precise meaning and status of the words *positivism* and *empiricism* later affected the emerging discipline of sociology.

HUMAN NATURE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The phrase *civil society* was central to the European Enlightenment as a description of the conditions of organized social life. The French and Scottish *philosophes* were preoccupied with the concept of civil society, its moral values, and its development. John Locke (1632–1704) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) were two early contributors to the debate on human nature. In *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690), Locke argues that individuals will readily abdicate their agency and live under the rules of civil society for protection: “To avoid this state of war ... is one great reason of men’s putting themselves into society.”²⁴ In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes portrays humans as innately and wholly self-seeking and engaged in perpetual war. Hobbes’s work is pre-Enlightenment, but it did influence later *philosophes*, such as Rousseau.

The prominent Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) was probably one of the first to use *société* as a key concept and explicitly to reason in terms of social relations.²⁵ In *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*, published in 1755, he declares, “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, took it into his head to say ‘This is mine,’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society.”²⁶ For Rousseau, the natural state was not the cause of human misery; it was the origin of society, principally private property, that placed new chains on the poor and gave new powers to the rich. Rousseau concludes, “The original man having vanished by degrees, society only offers to us an assembly of artificial men and factitious passions, which are the work of all these *new relations*, and without any real foundation in nature”²⁷ – the passage exemplifies social theory in the making.²⁸



Photo 3.2. William Hogarth, *Gin Lane* (engraving, 1751). The observation and celebration of the ordinary, imperfect world of “common nature” was typical of Enlightenment thinking.

In his deliberations on the notion of a covenant between individuals and the state, Rousseau presupposes a theory of social life involving new social relations, social institutions, and social processes. Whereas Hobbes in *Leviathan* represents human life as “solitary, brutish, and short,” Rousseau represents the savage in the state of nature as an innocent who

becomes corrupted by the encroachment of civil society.²⁹ He contends that there must be two kinds of social inequality, one that is natural or physical, and hence beyond human control, and one that is moral or political because it depends upon human choice. Claims to rule put forward by a few who govern the many can have no force unless they are acknowledged to be legitimate by others.³⁰ Rousseau's secular views, not astonishingly perhaps, influenced the French revolutionaries.³¹

In *Of The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau argues that the inequalities established by humans themselves require each individual to enter into relations with other individuals.³² This situation creates a complex reciprocal arrangement – expressed in the commercial terminology of a *social contract* – that converts the mass into a coherent body and constitutes a society. A social contract evolves as one of the fundamental concepts of Enlightenment thought. He warns that a social contract must have been a hoax perpetrated by the rich upon the poor. As he put it, “All ran headlong to their chains believing they had secured their liberty.”³³ It is suggested that Rousseau's Second Discourse expounds a theory of the development of social inequality that is analogous to Marx's own concept of history.³⁴

Other scholars conceptualize society as a complex structure of institutions and social processes shaped by specific historical development.³⁵ In *On the Spirit of the Laws*, Charles-Louis de Sécondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), theorizes society as an organic whole and relates its different cultures to specific stages of historical development. Montesquieu's *Spirit* contains the genesis of social theory. In it, he outlines a comparative analysis of different types of government, each of which is, effectively, a type of society.³⁶ He identifies three basic kinds of government: republican, monarchic, and despotic. His analysis examines the nature of government and its principles. He argues that virtue, the thirst for glory, and self-sacrifice drive republics (e.g., Ancient Greece). Monarchies are driven by honor or status, meaning the ambition to receive titles (e.g., England). And despotism is founded on fear and the will of the despot (e.g., Asian societies). Human passions make up part of a wider totality of interrelated conditions, institutions, and cultures that underlie and sustain that form. This totality he called “the spirit of the laws.” Though society presents itself as a chaotic phenomenon, Montesquieu contends that beneath the surface exists a definite structure or laws comprising patterns of human behavior. It was this observation that led Durkheim to argue that Montesquieu founded sociology.³⁷ Others are less positive about Montesquieu's scholastic accomplishments.³⁸

In the decades after 1750, a group of Scottish philosophers – Adam Ferguson, John Millar, David Hume, and Adam Smith – produced works of genius in social theory.³⁹ In *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* published in 1767, Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) traces the development of society from primitive to capitalist forms: each stage of evolution being due to a dynamic interaction of social, technological, and psychological factors. He was the first to point out the socially negative consequences of the division of labor.⁴⁰ Also to be found in *An Essay* is the seed of American sociologist C. Wright Mills’s idea of the sociological imagination. Ferguson writes, “The history of the individual is but a detail of the sentiments and thoughts he has entertained in the view of his species: and every experiment relative to this subject should be made with entire societies, not with single men.”⁴¹ Ferguson was particularly interested in how economic pressures might affect the psychology of commercial society. He writes, “Man is sometimes found a detached and a solitary being: he has found an object which sets him in competition with his fellow-creatures.”⁴² These observations by Ferguson are remarkably akin to Marx’s concept of alienation.

The Scottish philosopher and political economist Adam Smith (1723–90) is probably the most influential figure in Scottish Enlightenment historiography. In his economic treatise, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith identifies and explains the fundamental “natural” principles upon which economic wealth and societal development are, and should be, based. Motivated to promote their own economic welfare, all individuals are free to pursue their self-interests. Smith views the state as part of civil society that legalizes and protects property relations. In *An Inquiry*, he also presents a rudimentary theory of social class, arguing that modernity produced three main classes: landowners, capitalists, and wage laborers. Property forms the basis of social differentiation, the natural source of influence and authority. It is easy to caricature Smith’s treatise as a heartless justification for market fundamentalism and inequality. But Smith, foremost a moral philosopher, did not mistake self-interest for greed, and he never suggested that the serving of self-interest was the only view of the human endeavor.⁴³ Neither did he believe that industrial capitalism never required state intervention. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), he declares:

The love of our country seems ... to involve ... an earnest desire to render the condition of our fellow citizens as safe, respectable, and

happy as we can.... He is certainly not a good citizen who does not wish to promote, by every means in his power, the welfare of the whole society of his fellow-citizens.... Concern for our own happiness recommends to us the virtue of prudence: concern for that of other people, the virtues of justice and beneficence.⁴⁴

The *sine qua non* of Smith's argument is that economic outcomes and the evolution of human life draw on the theory of political economy and moral personality. It is widely agreed that trust is particularly significant in late modernity. Generally overlooked however, are Smith's writings and understanding of the role of trust in interpersonal relations which, it is argued, add to his stature as a "theorist of modernity."⁴⁵ For these reasons, we need to be wary of interpreting his oeuvres solely in terms of the "hidden hand" of modern economics and neoconservative ideology.⁴⁶

HUMAN EMANCIPATION: SLAVERY AND WOMEN

The ideological justification for human slavery predates the European Enlightenment. In the new age, when philosophers and other public academics believed in a *universal* human being – one possessed of reason – and when they gave primacy to equality and freedom, slavery and women's subordination is a paradox.⁴⁷ In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes declares that reason was found in equal measure in all men: "From this equality of ability [among men], ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends."⁴⁸ Yet plantation owners legally treated slaves as private property. Colonial slavery raised questions about who a person was, who was inside, and who, such as a slave, was outside the boundary of the community. Slavery could exist without the guilt or abhorrence of its beneficiaries if those totally subordinated can be seen as outsiders. As missionary activity in the colonies increased, more slaves were baptized and became Christians. The problem arose, therefore, of reconciling the ideological language of spiritual equality with the actual legal inequality and servitude of enslaved Christians. How could the quality of being a brother or sister in Christ and of being a subhuman slave coexist in one person? The fact that the abolition of colonial slavery involved the dismantling of a highly profitable economic structure heightened the intensity of the public discourse on slavery.

In Enlightenment thought, property holding and liberty were closely related. The right to possess property gave men [*sic*] a “stake in the country,” which stabilized society. By this logic, property rights would be undermined if slaves were freed. In Europe and the Americas, the bourgeoisie justified colonial slavery by linking it to race. On the basis of “scientific” evidence, it was argued that, for the African, slavery was natural to their being because they were inferior. Contradiction therefore informs Enlightenment thinking. The discourse on universal “man” affirms and simultaneously denies the unity of humankind in order, on the one hand, to sustain the European perspective of human emancipation that flowed into the French and American revolutions and, on the other, to enable the practice of enslavement of non-European people.⁴⁹

The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) questioned the presumption of White racial superiority, as did the progressive Enlightenment thinker Montesquieu. In *De l'esprit des lois*, published in 1748, Montesquieu posited the Enlightenment case against slavery:

Slavery in its proper sense is the establishment of a right which makes one man so much the owner of another man that he is the absolute master of his life and of his goods. It is not good by its nature; it is useful neither to the master nor the slave: not to the slave, because he can do nothing from virtue; not to the master, because he contracts all sorts of bad habits from his slaves, because he imperceptibly grows accustomed to failing in all the moral virtues, because he grows proud, curt, harsh, angry, voluptuous, and cruel.⁵⁰

Adam Smith also campaigned to eradicate slavery, as this passage from his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* shows:

There is not a Negro from the coast of Africa who does not ... possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of conceiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished.⁵¹

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith presents the economic and utilitarian critique of slave labor. For Smith, slavery was not only morally repugnant but also economically unsound. He writes, “The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any.”⁵² Another Scottish philosopher, Adam Ferguson, observes in 1769 that “No one is born a slave; because everyone is born with all his original rights ... no one can become a slave; because no one, from being a person, can ... become a thing or subject of property.”⁵³ Condorcet’s *Réflexions sur l’esclavage des nègres* (*Reflections on Black Slavery*) of 1781 is the most radical treatise on the justification of abolition. He openly addresses the slaves as his brothers and recognizes in them an unreserved entitlement to full human rights.⁵⁴ In the late eighteenth century, the shift of societal consensus or, to use the German word, *Zeitgeist* (“spirit of the times”), moved against slavery. The abolition of slavery took place in the French colonies over the course of the French Revolution (1789–99), in British Caribbean colonies in the 1830s, and in the United States in 1865.

The standard history of the European Enlightenment, as Margaret Atherton’s *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*⁵⁵ points out, is that it obscures the fact that women as well as men wrote and published philosophy during the period. One such woman was Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), a product of the Enlightenment and one of the first feminist thinkers. Her contribution is also considered in [chapter 13](#) so we can afford to be brief here on her critique of the Enlightenment. The problem of reconciling the ideological language of spiritual equality and legal inequality applied to European women in the same measure as it did to slaves. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, White women were baptized, but spiritual equality did not result in their legal equality with men. In her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft persistently draws parallels between the status of slaves in the colonies and the status of White middle-class women in the metropolis.⁵⁶ She takes many of the ideals of the Enlightenment and applies them to middle-class women, arguing that it was hypocritical not to do so. In essence, she argues that, if rationality is essentially human, it is irrational not to allot that characteristic to women too: knowledge is, she argues, learnable by all – men and women – and in so doing she provides an excoriating



Photo 3.3. The Kneeling Slave: “Am I not a man and a brother?” This image is a typical Enlightenment representation of a slave asserting his common humanity.

rebuttal of Rousseau’s pedagogical treatise *Emile*, in which he proposes that woman’s nature disqualifies her from an academic education. The assumption that woman is essentially inferior to man, she posits, cannot be demonstrated as long as she is subjugated: “He [Man] denies woman reason, shuts her out from knowledge.”⁵⁷ Wollstonecraft persuasively argues that, excluded from reason and education, women are confined within the arbitrary power of beauty and sensual experience. In Western culture, men constitute women as “the fair sex” by means of rituals of gallantry and courtesy, thereby separating women from the male world of reason. Once trapped within the sensual world of beauty, women’s subordination is further strengthened as they are forced into

both financial and emotional dependence on men – into a life of “petty” activity.⁵⁸ One effect of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the questioning of any analysis of a capitalist society that segregates studies of paid work from those of family and gender divisions.

THE ROMANTIC-CONSERVATIVE REACTION

The Enlightenment, as even this short selective survey should indicate, did not constitute a simple unitary body of doctrine; it assumed many forms. The term *liberal individualism* is used as a brief description of Enlightenment thought. By this we mean that the individual is seen as the location and source of all the important ingredients in the “liberated” society.⁵⁹ Several core concepts or “tools” were formulated from the Enlightenment, which helped to change the way philosophers viewed the relationship between the individual and society. The Rousseauist notion of the social contract entailed *freedom* to engage in contract formation; *equality* between parties to the contract; *universality*, in that the personal character of either party was considered irrelevant; *private property*, the right to acquire and dispose of it as the parties wished; and *religious tolerance*. The individual’s religious convictions were considered irrelevant; put in crude commercial terms, religious intolerance was bad for business. The radical ideology of the philosophers was a change catalyst and therefore found little traction among the rising elite urban classes. The Enlightenment’s agnostic ideology was too partisan to remain unchallenged.

In the 1740s, dissenting voices against the Enlightenment were increasingly heard. Johann Gottfried Herder and Edmund Burke began the critique, which became known as the “Romantic-Conservative reaction.”⁶⁰ The influential Catholic critic Edmund Burke (1729–97) linked morality and civil government closely to the divine order and to the providential authority of God. In *A Vindication of a Natural Society*, published in 1756, he argues that Rousseau’s rejection of inequality meant nothing less than the rejection of the civil order and God-given natural law. In later publications, Burke defended inequality and the consequent strata of the aristocratic hierarchy as a natural phenomenon that guaranteed civil order. After 1815, though initially a reactionary movement that defended the status quo, the Catholic counterrevolutionary movement developed propositions about modernity that greatly influenced Saint-Simon, Comte, and Durkheim.

The French Catholic intellectuals Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald both rejected the rational core principles enshrined in the social contract; emphasized *natural* social hierarchy, duty, and collective good; and conceptualized society as an organic whole in which *rational* and also traditional elements played an active, constitutive role. Like Burke, Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), a resolute opponent of the Revolution, repudiated Rousseau’s conception of the origin of society because it implied that it had been created without the intervention of divine providence. Maistre’s writings may be read as a sustained polemic against secular-rational Enlightenment thinking. But his work is a reformulation of the medieval doctrine of an infallible church.⁶¹ Louis de Bonald (1740–1840) was an influential figure in the Catholic counterrevolutionary movement. In his best-known work, *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux* [*Theory of Political and Religious Power*], he presents a rebuttal of Montesquieu’s *On the Spirit of the Laws* and Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*. Bonald contends that knowledge is not simply derived from individual reason but is situated in a cultural community and is a product of the social. Art and literature, for example, are expressions of the society that produces the artifacts. For Bonald, the natural man is a meaningless abstraction: Natural man does not exist, only social man.⁶² Like Maistre, Bonald argued that humans, by their very nature, are social, moral, and cultural beings, and he repudiated Enlightenment rationalist, humanist, individualist ideology. As Bonald expressed it, “The schools of modern philosophy ... have produced the philosophy of modern man, the philosophy of I ... I want to produce the philosophy of social man, the philosophy of we.”⁶³

Society, moreover, did not consist of simply an aggregate of individuals; rather, it was the expression of a whole culture. For Bonald, the individual cannot exist outside society, and, consequently, it is the individual, not society, that is an abstraction. Bonald believes that urban industrial capitalism undermined the most natural and sacred of social units, the family, and he extolled the importance of the community and the binding influence of the church.

Although we can detect in the Enlightenment dissidents a strong anti-modernist sentiment, over decades the reaction to the Enlightenment movements mutated into a new, more comprehensive humanism.⁶⁴ This essentially *dialectical* view of intellectual history, which was first grasped by Hegel, posits that neither Enlightenment thinking

nor reactions against it developed into simple rationalism or simple anti-rationalism. Louis Dupré provides an insightful passage describing the dialectical relation between social transformation and the roles of ideas: “Whenever human thought has been dominated by some special interest, the most fruitful philosophy of the age has reflected that domination; not passively, ... but actively, by making a special attempt to understand it and placing it in the focus of philosophical inquiry.”⁶⁵

What is most significant for our purposes is this: the ongoing engagement between Enlightenment thinkers and their detractors contributed substantially to the foundation of sociological thought. On the one side, we have Enlightenment individualism with its emphasis on reason and a reverence for science as a way to investigate society. On the other side, we have a conservative collectivism with its emphasis on extra individual concepts and its conception of society as an organic whole. As Irving Zeitlin argues, once expunged of its theological assumptions, Bonald’s polemic against Enlightenment ideology becomes the source of core sociological concepts and ideas.⁶⁶

POSITIVE SOCIOLOGY

Sociology has always had an ambivalent relationship to the Enlightenment movement. On the one hand, sociology emerged out of and extended Enlightenment thinking on reason and epistemology; on the other hand, it draws upon counter-Enlightenment thinking for its subject matter, particularly the secular, collective concepts of community and culture, rather than focusing on the power of pervasive individualism. Sociology is therefore an amalgam of secular liberal ideology and conservative intellectual thought.⁶⁷ Elements of both can be found in the works of French socialists Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, the two academics most closely identified with establishing sociology as a distinct discipline.

Saint-Simon (1760–1825) is credited for conceiving both the name and the essentials of positive sociology.⁶⁸ He was fiercely critical of the French Revolution. Like Bonald, Saint-Simon believed that knowledge is a product of a community of ideas. Further, he believed that knowledge is both the binding force of society and a moving power of progress. Like Marx after him, Saint-Simon viewed the historical transformation

of society as a result of forces that had been maturing in the old regime. In his view, the *philosophes* had contributed to the disintegration of the *ancien régime*. According to Saint-Simon, the new order needed to be built on a foundation of new intellectual principles. Science would replace religious dogma and would be the defining force of society. His view of French modernity would remain essentially hierarchical, with society divided into *industriels* (wealth creators) and *oisifs* (idlers). Saint-Simon, then, envisioned what historian Eric Hobsbawm calls “a Rousseauist ‘cult of the supreme being.’”⁶⁹

Auguste Comte’s (1798–1857) parents were devout Catholics and ardent royalists. His most famous work, *Cours de philosophie positive*, published in 1830, attempts to understand modernity following the French Revolution of 1789, its excesses, the implosion of the *ancien régime*, and the creation of a new economic regime – industrial capitalism. Comte claimed to be the champion of intellectual positivism, broadly understood as an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of society and social life. For Comte, positivism and the new science of sociology would provide the intellectual and moral basis of the new social order. He argued for giving up the metaphysical search for causes; instead, he advocated the search for invariable relations between things – the regular patterns in social phenomena.

Comte’s “Law of Three Stages” is one of his most well-known propositions endeavoring to discover the causes of these social phenomena. He claimed to have unearthed a great fundamental law – the human mind evolves through a series of cognitive states, each of which marks a different way of thinking or philosophizing. These three theoretical states are the theological or fictitious state, the metaphysical or abstract state, and the scientific or positive state. Comte believed that, in the positive state, “the human mind, recognizing the impossibility of obtaining absolute truth, gives up the search after the origin and hidden causes of the universe and a knowledge of the final causes of phenomena. It endeavors now only to discover, by a well-combined use of reasoning and observation, the actual laws of phenomena – that is to say, their invariable relations of succession and likeness.”⁷⁰ Comte believed that metaphysical thought was a rational attempt to explain all worldly phenomena that are beyond the physical, that is, not observable. Catholic theology represented *metaphysical* thought and, in Comte’s opinion, the

human mind during the period of European industrialization that was leaving the metaphysical and entering the positive or scientific stage. The crisis in modernity, then, occurred because too many features of the metaphysical remained to sustain the new regime, which should embrace positive philosophy. Comte wrote, “We are theologians in childhood, metaphysical in youth, and natural philosophers in virility.”⁷¹

In *Philosophie positive* Comte’s positive doctrine attempts to reconcile two mutually antagonistic principles: *order* and *progress*. Derived from Catholic theology, the principle of order or *static* describes the functioning of a society and its culture that binds society together. The principle of progress or *dynamics* describes the “functional prerequisites” for historical development. This principle was derived from the Enlightenment. As Larry Ray points out, Comte laid the foundations of sociological positivism, which was the dominant paradigm throughout the nineteenth century.⁷² Comte’s insights on modernity remain influential. Most important is the “centrality of the social” – his insistence that individuals are significant only as social beings and that society is an organic necessity, which “commands all times and places,” remains influential. He also emphasized the importance of language to transmit cultural mores and values across generations. However, Zeitlin has contested the originality of Comte’s social theory. Zeitlin writes, “Auguste Comte ... appropriated virtually all of Saint-Simon’s ideas.”⁷³ Other sociologists have given more favorable evaluations. Comte should be given credit for synthesizing the conceptual terrain of sociology and for rejecting metaphysics in favor of positivist empirical methods.⁷⁴

CRITICISM

The set of interlocking intellectual projects that was the Enlightenment was internally fractured and riddled by contradictions. The debates on slavery and women’s rights are examples of its intellectual anomalies. Enlightenment discourse presents a Eurocentric and “White” interpretation of human nature and history. Silvia Sebastiani’s *Scottish Enlightenment* offers a critical interpretation of Enlightenment thinking on slavery and women in society. She argues that at the very heart of Enlightenment’s universalistic conception of man “sprang the nucleus of Western racist ideology.”⁷⁵ In *Black Marxism*, Cedric J. Robinson

argues that European scholars “worked hard” to exorcise from European historiography the cultural and intellectual contributions of North Africa, particularly Islam’s social and intellectual influence, in order to “whiten the West [and] ... maintain the purity of the European race.”⁷⁶ For Robinson, the European Enlightenment was responsible for “the invention of the Negro – and by extension the fabrication of whiteness and all the policing of racial boundaries that came with it.”⁷⁷

The intellectual legacy of Enlightenment ideology is a masculine vision of the human nature and of social life. The Canadian-born academic Sylvana Tomaselli, who specializes in the history of womanhood, offers a feminist interpretation of women in history, which “linked women, not, as is all too swiftly done, to nature, but to culture and the process of historical development.”⁷⁸ Similarly, Rosalind Sydie’s *Natural Women, Cultured Men* luminously explores the *sex-blind* nature of classical social thought. Canonical writers, she argues convincingly, overwhelmingly viewed the “natural” differences between the sexes based on the reproductive capacity of women to justify the hierarchical relations of female subordination and exclusion from the public sphere. Masculine interpretation of nature predates the Enlightenment era. Aristotle, for example, believed that the female was an incomplete version of the male. And one Renaissance writer opined that “men are by nature of a more elevated mind than women.”⁷⁹

The European Enlightenment, then, was grounded in the assumption that universal man, in thought and practice, becomes *rational* man, active and able to conquer the forces of the natural world, and that this man is in stark contrast to *subjective* woman, passive and a repository of the natural. Influential Enlightenment writers promulgated the widespread conviction that women were, by nature, less rational, less objective, more prone to hysteria, weaker than men in mind and body, best suited to the domestic sphere, and often inherently inclined to vanity, frivolity, and wantonness. Tension and ambivalences inform Enlightenment thought on women in society. As Sebastiani observes, “Woman is represented simultaneously as the ‘embodiment of the natural’ and the ‘repository of civilization,’ in a complex relationship between the private sphere – increasingly associated with virtue and therefore positioned within the family – and the public sphere, linked instead to the public discourse of rights.”⁸⁰ The early feminists’ critiques of the masculinity of Enlightenment thinking exposed the limits of Enlightenment

radicalism, arguing that, if rationality is essentially human, it was irrational to believe that only men had this characteristic. Expunged of theological ideology and further theorizing by Saint-Simon and Comte, Enlightenment thinking about society, including the idea of a dichotomized social order as natural, became the foundation of sociological positivism, which remained the dominant paradigm until the early twentieth century.

Between 1900 and 1915, Enlightenment thought was increasingly challenged by late-modern thinkers and was ultimately dethroned by an emphasis upon divergent frameworks of thinking. In Germany, writers such as Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche no longer accorded Enlightenment reason and rationality a privileged status in the definition of the essence of human nature. Weber argued that universal freedom is suffocated by the growth of rationality. Nietzsche (1844–1900) placed aesthetics above science and rationality and denounced the prevailing Enlightenment logic on linear progress, civilization, and morality. In the twentieth century, the logic of Enlightenment rationality led to domination and oppression and the unparalleled institutionalization of state violence,⁸¹ but for the classical social thinkers, these observations were made with the facility of hindsight.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter has covered a lot of material. The Enlightenment is best described as an intellectual and cultural movement that challenged religion's preeminent authority to both know and speak the truth and affected virtually every area of Western knowledge. Its legacy and the post-Revolutionary, conservative philosophical reaction are a number of propositions about society: that society has an organic nature, with internal laws of unity and development; it creates the individual, and individuals have no existence outside of a social context; society is composed of relationships and institutions; and it has institutions and customs that are positively functional in that they fulfill human needs either directly or indirectly by serving other essential institutions. We have seen throughout this chapter that the European Enlightenment, like most intellectual movements, was not a unified body of thinking but was internally fractured and riddled by contradictions. Its legacy

could be restorative. There remains today an ongoing need to instill skepticism about the motives of political elites. For example, Scott McClellan's scathing memoir, *What Happened*,⁸² describes his years at the White House and speaks of a culture of deception, the manipulation of public opinion, and lies to justify the Iraq War. In this context, given the ongoing abuses of power of world leaders, and contemporary discourses in and around questions of fake news and post-truth, the critical spirit of Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers is vitally important for developing critical skills to judge the credibility and reliability of information.⁸³

The chaotic transformation of European societies between 1700 and 1850 was due to what we have called three waves of modernity: the British Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the contemporaneous Intellectual Revolution consisting of Enlightenment and post-Revolutionary thoughts. These revolutions profoundly influenced and shaped the work of the classical canon to which we now turn.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 Why has the Enlightenment become known as a social movement, rather than an intellectual project?
- 2 What are the main ideas of European Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment philosophers?
- 3 European Enlightenment brought to the fore the notion that people had the capacity to shape their own lives. To what extent do Enlightenment principles explain contemporary society?

PART 2

The Classical Social Theorists

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4

Karl Marx: Philosophy and Dialectics

Today, more than 140 years after his death, Karl Marx's ideas still influence modern sociology. At the center of Marx's social theory are the precepts that the anatomy of civil society is to be found in the social and economic modes of production, and that social conditions determine human consciousness and patterns of human history. This perspective has important ramifications for sociological theory.¹ Epistemologically, sociological theory must embody concepts that analyze the making, not the completion, of social structure, and it must include the nexus of social relations, cultural conditioning, and the entrenched interests of powerful social elites. The analysis of capitalist society by Marx and his lifelong intellectual companion, Friedrich Engels, is firmly rooted in the dual revolutions in Britain and France. Marx and Engels provided the ideological and political vocabulary for social movements that profoundly shaped global politics for seventy years. Since his death, some of the things done under the doctrine called "Marxism" would make Marx himself turn in his grave. Probably for these reasons Karl Marx, whether revered or reviled, is likely the only classic social theorist the general public have a strong opinion about, without actually reading his voluminous works.

The next three chapters survey Marx's writings with particular focus on his philosophy, history, and economics and how these contribute to critical social theory. When Marx died in 1883, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Du Bois, Mead, and Perkins Gilman were either students or were

beginning their academic careers. Marx's chronological position, therefore, means that the other classical social theorists are conventionally seen in relation to him. We begin by first reviewing his life and published works before explaining Marx's philosophy and methodology.

LIFE AND WORKS

Karl Marx was born in 1818 into a middle-class Jewish family in the predominantly Catholic city of Trier, Germany. The city had very little industry, and liberal ideology had much support among large sections of the city's population, as it did in other regions of Germany. Karl Marx's father, Heinrich Marx, was a rabbi in Trier. Little is known of the ancestry of Henriette Marx, Marx's mother, but like her husband she came from the rabbinic tradition. Born in the Netherlands, she was the daughter of Isaac Pressburg, a rabbi in Nijmegen. There were nine children in the Marx family, of whom Karl was the eldest. Antisemitism in the Rhineland between 1815 and 1848 increased Jewish self-consciousness, deep feelings of alienation, and consequent political radicalization of the Jewish intelligentsia. It is a matter of conjecture how Marx's Jewish ancestry and the political context affected him, but it would be facile to disregard Jewish self-consciousness as a factor that influenced Marx's development. Marx's Jewishness made him an *outsider* in European society, and, it is argued, the experience of prejudice and discrimination is a powerful argument for changing society.²

A lawyer, Heinrich Marx had adopted the ideas of the Enlightenment and had considerable influence on Karl Marx's intellectual development, as did a family friend, Baron von Westphalen, who introduced the young Marx to the utopian socialism put forward by Saint-Simon. Marx's childhood seems uneventful and followed the pattern of what could be expected of a son of a relatively comfortable middle-class family.³ He attended the Frederick William High School in Trier, which included Enlightenment ideology in the school's curriculum. In 1835, Karl Marx became a student of law at the University of Bonn. A year later, Marx transferred to the University of Berlin. He also became engaged to and married Jenny von Westphalen; her mother, Jean Wisheart, was of Scottish origin.⁴ At the University of Berlin, Marx read

the works of Spinoza, David Hume, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and studied Hegelianism, the philosophy of Georg Hegel. The influence of Hegel upon the young Marx was mediated by the lectures of Eduard Gans, who acquainted his students – Marx included – with the ideas of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), known as Saint-Simonianism, and French socialism. Marx’s doctoral thesis contained the post-Hegelian theme of *praxis* that was to become so central to his later philosophy.⁵ Whereas Hegel’s philosophy had only dealt with the present and the past, *praxis* focused on the “deed and social activity.”⁶ In 1841, Marx was awarded his doctorate in philosophy.

After completing his doctorate Marx was unable to obtain employment as a university professor because of his incendiary ideas. He accepted the position of editor of *Rheinische Zeitung* (*Rhine News*), a weekly newspaper financed by liberal industrialists. The German government suppressed the paper, and in March 1843 Marx relocated to Paris where he began his lifelong friendship with Friedrich Engels, the son of a German cotton spinner whose company had a factory in Manchester, England. During this period, Marx wrote a series of searing essays critiquing Hegelian philosophy and capitalism. In 1845 he was expelled from Paris for subversive journalism, but with Engels was able to write *The German Ideology*. After a visit to London, Marx and Engels were commissioned to write the theory underpinning the political activities of the Communist League. The result was the polemic *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848. As noted, this was a period of social and revolutionary upheaval in France and Germany, and notoriety followed Marx everywhere. In July 1849, he returned to Paris but was expelled yet again, and the Marx family moved to London where he began what Marx called his “sleepless night of exile.”⁷

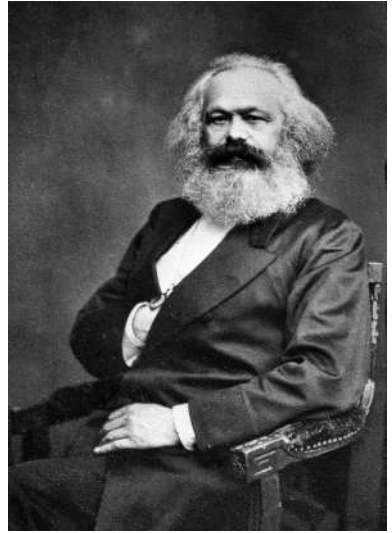


Photo 4.1. Karl Marx was born in 1818 in Trier, Germany. In 1836, he married Jenny von Westphalen. The Marx family experienced financial hardship because of Marx’s inability to manage his finances. Marx was expelled from Paris in 1849, and he and his family moved to London, where he died in his study in 1883.

For the next decade, Marx experienced financial hardship and personal tragedies. His letters to Engels describe his misery and impoverishment: "I am unable to go out for want of the coats I have in pawn, and I can no longer eat meat for want of credit.... My wife is ill. Little Jenny is ill ... I could not and cannot call the doctor because I have no money to buy medicine. For the past eight to ten days, I have been feeding the family solely on bread and potatoes ... If possible, therefore, send me a few pounds."⁸ We should note that the Marx family was never poor by ordinary standards. In 1851, one of Marx's most poverty-stricken years, his income was three times that earned by an average skilled British worker. Marx was a traditional Victorian middle-class patriarch who lived beyond his means.⁹ Despite his "sub-proletarian" way of life, as he put it, he thought it "unseemly" *not* to have a private secretary.¹⁰ What working-class families considered luxuries – dance, piano, and foreign language lessons for the children – Marx considered "absolute necessities." He was often to muse in letters to Engels that while he spent so much time writing about money, he had little skill for managing it. A regular source of income came from his articles for the *New York Tribune*. But Marx resented doing what he called "journalism muck" because it kept him away from his research. In 1864 a legacy brought financial relief.

In the early 1850s, Marx began working on his treatise on political economy, *Capital*, a manuscript for which he acknowledged he had "sacrificed ... health, ... happiness and ... family."¹¹ However, procrastination, multiple revisions, frequent bouts of ill health, and political activism delayed its completion. His publisher must have had monumental patience. In 1846 Marx wrote to his German publisher saying the manuscript would be completed in six months. Twenty years later it was still unfinished.¹² Volume one of *Capital* was finally completed in April 1867. It was Engels who edited and published volumes two and three of *Capital* in July 1885 and November 1894 after Marx's death. The *Grundrisse* (*Foundations of a Critique of Political Economy*) was written during the winter of 1857–8, but the manuscript was lost and not published until 1953. The *Grundrisse* provide invaluable insight on the "inner logic of *Capital*."¹³

In the 1870s, although suffering after a mild stroke, Marx did manage to write the second edition of *Capital*, and a critique of German socialists under the title *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, published by

Engels in 1891. In December 1881, Marx's wife died of cancer, and, two years later, his daughter Jenny, an essayist and prolific translator of both literary and political works, also died. Two months after his daughter's death, racked by bronchitis and suffering an abscess in the lung, Marx died stateless in his armchair on March 14, 1883. His lifetime intellectual companion Friedrich Engels died of cancer on August 5, 1895. The rest of this chapter examines Marx's philosophy.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

The philosophical context of Marx's early education was the rationalism of the European Enlightenment and the school of German philosophy called idealism. It is not possible to understand Marx's ideas without understanding the work of Georg Hegel, and to understand Hegel we need to be familiar with the work of the German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Feuerbach. The sequence was that Hegel improved Kantian idealism, Feuerbach transformed Hegel's dialectical mode of thinking, and Marx extended Feuerbachian dialectics.

German idealism emerged in part as a response to the academic discourse on *phenomenalism*, that is, the question of whether human knowledge was restricted to that provided by human impressions, or whether there existed a reality independent of human experience. David Hume was a skeptic. He questioned the power of reason to provide demonstration of aspects of reality that human beings believe, including miracles and religion. He cast doubt on the existence of God and on the frailty of reason to provide answers for which it is simply not capable. Historically, the occurrence of miracles is evidence for the existence of God. In his *Essay on Miracles* (1748), Hume challenges the likelihood of miracles actually occurring, because eyewitness testimony is insufficient: "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence," wrote Hume.¹⁴ In *Dialogues* (1779), he authored one of the principal statements of religious skepticism in the period. He was denied a university teaching position for negating the deist argument for the Creator.

The Enlightenment passion for achieving universal truth through reason was challenged by Hume. In *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) and *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), he argues that human sense experiences can never demonstrate a necessary real

connection between what humans routinely perceive as cause and effect. Hume wrote, “I venture to affirm of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an unconceivable rigidity, in perpetual flux and movement.”¹⁵ He points out that causality is only a subjective expectation stimulated by the mechanism of association, and this is learned. The gist of his thesis on phenomenalism is that ideas extend no further than human experience. According to Hume, without the support of experience, reason hovers in an experiential void and actually takes us nowhere. Seemingly, in the absence of experience, knowledge of the universe is placed in a magical realm predicated on the faith that humans are mysteriously connected to it from within.

Immanuel Kant saw Enlightenment as a liberating process. Liberty is self-determination. For Kant, what is real and what is not was a matter of great political importance and furtherance of self-determination. The Enlightenment insisted on the audacity of relinquishing traditional feudal law for abstract ideals of universal justice. Importantly, it also contested the reality of superstitions. As long as people believed that poverty and disease, for example, were God’s punishment for human sin, they were unlikely to explore ways of tackling these social problems. In the political milieu of eighteenth-century Western Europe, Kant’s philosophy was widely considered incendiary and later fueled the ideals of the French Revolution. Kant himself averred that his trilogy of major works, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Critique of Judgement* (1790) effected a “Copernican revolution” in philosophy. His treatment of human faculties in the three *Critiques* sought to explain the workings of the human mind: its ability to reason, to form morally correct decisions, and to shape a satisfying aesthetics.

It was largely the writings of David Hume that inspired Kant to refute British empiricism and reaffirm the paramount importance of reason. Kant rejected the underlying premise that *all* scientific knowledge derives solely from experience. Thus, in his influential work on epistemology he writes:

There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience.... In the order of time, therefore, we have no knowledge antecedent to experience, and with experience all our knowledge

begins. But ... it does not follow that [knowledge] all arises out of experience. For it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through impressions and of what our own faculty of knowledge supplies from itself. Any knowledge that is thus independent of experience and even of all impressions of the senses ... is entitled *a priori*, and distinguished from empirical, which has its sources *a posteriori*, that is, in experience.¹⁶

For Kant, the human mind is not simply a *tabula rasa*, a pristine blank slate, passively recording the sense impressions it receives from the external world; it is also an active agent in understanding those impressions in terms of certain categories and principles that it brings to bear on its experience and the multiple data coming to it. The human mind's immanent principles include, for instance, cause and effect. These innate principles exist independently of and prior to sense experience. Kant's most creative intellectual idea is that the human mind imposes structure and order on sense experience: "The order and regularity in objects, which we entitle nature, we ourselves introduce."¹⁷ For example, when we make a judgment such as "the sun caused the earth to become warm," we are not simply describing what we perceive, because all we perceive is that the sun appears and then the earth becomes warm. We make sense of what we perceive by engaging the principle of causality that we apply to experience. Thus, for Kant, humans are active, rational beings who understand what they perceive in terms of the mind's categories and principles. The individual human mind does not derive the laws of nature *from* the natural world, but, on the contrary, it imposes its own laws on nature. In part, individuals construct the natural world that they perceive. Thus, Kant gave primacy to the subject – the human mind – rather than to the objects of knowledge.

Kant's philosophy contains paradoxes. On the one hand, he is a materialist when he says we can only know the world as it appears to us and is experienced by us, that is, not as it is "in-itself." On the other hand, Kant is an idealist when he insists that ideals are not to be measured by whether they reflect reality: We adjudicate on what is real and what is not by whether it lives up to experience.¹⁸ Kant posits that, if our ideas of what is possible are restricted by our ideas of what is reality, no new ideas can flourish. While providing a foundation for knowledge

through reaffirming the validity of knowing by a priori reasoning, Kant simultaneously defines limits to laws of reason by insisting that, for rational human beings, knowledge is restricted within the boundary of the phenomenon. Although Kant says that we have no rational grounds, no proof, of any divine forces, the effect is to make cognitive space for faith in the existence of divine forces beyond the boundary. According to Kant's analysis, human unhappiness results from the inability of a rational, but finite, being to realize the inner drive to be perfect, or from the failure to accept human boundaries. Escaping from the phenomenal world and entering the world of *noumenon* was achievable by an individual's own moral imperatives.

HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY AND DIALECTICS

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) endeavored to resolve the paradoxes introduced by Kant – dichotomies between faith and reason, between the infinite and the finite.¹⁹ Hegel's philosophy, which is abstract and quite difficult to understand, demands our attention for two reasons. First, it is an ambitious attempt to demonstrate that modernity contains within itself the intellectual resources to justify, rationally, its rupture with the premodern era.²⁰ And second, it gives greater emphasis to contradiction and social change. In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel provides a complex rational reconstruction of the entire prior movement of the Enlightenment. He emphasizes that we cannot ever simply perceive the world, or what is, without preconditions or presuppositions – and here Hegel follows Kant – because all human consciousness is informed by innate principles of thought that mediate everything we experience.²¹ While Hegel endorsed Kant's view on the importance of the human mind and mental instruments in the quest for truth, two criticisms of Kant are important for social theory. First, for Kant, the conceptual mental instruments through which humans see the world are static and universal for all finite rational beings. Thus, the framework constitutes a timeless grid that gives to human experience a uniform conceptual structure that remains constant throughout history. The basic structure of the human mind is the same in all times and spaces, whether in Aristotle's ancient Greece or Kant's early modern Germany.

From Hegel's perspective things are more complex. Some categories may well be universal, but others – for instance, cause and effect – are understood by civilizations in different ways. In *Phenomenology*, Hegel posits the existence of a universal Mind or Spirit (that is, *Geist* in Hegel's German) that knows itself as Spirit – which develops over time and may differentiate itself in different cultures that exist at the same time. Hegel's notion of Mind or Spirit is complex; in essence it is an activity or process involving self-expression, self-actualization, and self-knowledge.²² For Hegel, the principles or categories of thought that mediate everything we experience constitute the changing *historical* preconditions of knowledge. The following difficult-to-understand passage contains the essence of Hegel's philosophy:

The living Substance ... is, as Subject, pure, *simple negativity*, and is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the *doubling which sets up opposition*, and then again, the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis [the immediate simplicity]. Only this *self-restoring* sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself – not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such – is the Truth. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle ... only by being worked out to its end, is it actual.²³

The Subject, or consciousness – Spirit – is conceived as a *relation*, not a discrete thing; over time “it is the process of its own becoming.” Whereas Kant conceptualizes the mind's categories of understanding as being subjective forms that are imposed on the world and provided by sense experience, Hegel's conception of the self is *socially situated*, as each is a member of a historically specific community of self-conscious human agents. Hegel's idealism, therefore, provides the power to elevate the subject beyond immediate settings, by placing the individual outside the boundaries provided by empirical limitations. Moreover, his conception of Absolute Spirit, that is, truth in its totality, evolves and develops and has a circular structure: “a circle which returns upon itself, for mediation bends back its end into the beginning.”²⁴ In Hegel's eyes, human history is the story of the gradual realization of reason or spirit in the world; it is a rational process that enables truth to unfold and make itself known to the human mind. This realization of reason or spirit involves the full articulation of its internal contradictions.



Photo 4.2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was a major European philosopher who provided a significant critique of Kantian idealism. His philosophy, particularly his application of the dialectic method to explain human history, profoundly influenced Karl Marx. Marx famously “stood on its head” Hegelian dialectic thought.

This brings us to Hegel’s second important criticism of Kant, that the human mind develops by grasping the interplay between potential opposites, which results in a third alternative or “unity of opposites.”²⁵ For Hegel, the cognitive process by which we come to understand the world is a dialectical process. Dialectic is a concept that predates European Enlightenment. The etymology of *dialectic* comes from the Latin *dialectica* and Greek *dialektike*. The essence of dialectical thinking, for Hegel, lay in its intrinsic contradictions as well as in a method of interrelated thinking that uses concepts of change, motion, and process. Dialectical thinking is the principle whereby apparently stable thoughts reveal their inherent instability; such thoughts turn into their opposites and then into new, more complex thoughts, as the thought of being is overcome by the higher thought of becoming. Through “the process of its own becoming,” consciousness becomes

aware of itself as Spirit, that is, becomes “conscious of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself.”²⁶

The dialectical principle is “the soul of all genuinely scientific cognition,” and it is what gives Hegel’s thinking its distinctive character by making his thought dynamic. In his *Science of Logic* (1812) Hegel describes what he calls his “absolute method of knowing.”²⁷ The principle depicts three moments of each logical reality: (a) Thought, (b) the dialectical moment, and (c) the speculative moment or positive Reason. Hegel seeks to demonstrate that upon conceptual analysis, category A proves to contain a contrary category, B, and conversely that category B proves to contain category A, thus showing both categories to be self-contradictory. Hegel then seeks to demonstrate that this negative result has a positive outcome, a new category, C, which is referred to as the “negation of the negation.” Category C *unites* the preceding

categories A and B. When analyzed, the new category C contains both A and B, but they are united in such a way that they are also abolished. Hegel's term for this process is *Aufhebung*; that is, the categories A and B are preserved in the new C but only with their original meaning modified. This modification of their meaning renders them no longer self-contradictory. At a new higher level, category C plays the role that was formerly played by category A, and the reciprocal containment is repeated.²⁸ This triadic logic of understanding is often conveniently depicted as *thesis* (affirmation of Thought which is contradictory), *antithesis* (affirmation of its negation), and *synthesis* (a higher unity which itself becomes a thesis), but we must emphasize that Hegel never used these terms in his formulation.

The dialectical method provides the necessary five scientific standards for Hegel's philosophical system. A philosophy must (1) have a method, (2) constitute an entire system, (3) examine the totality, (4) demonstrate the necessity of everything, and (5) give to the subject an a priori character. The dialectical principle is abstract, but Hegel gave sociological form to his dialectical mode of thinking in his famous account of the mythical master-slave relation. Our aim here is simply to flesh out Hegel's dialectical thinking and, in so doing, to introduce the reader to its application in Marx's analysis of capitalism.

In *Phenomenology* Hegel applies the master-slave relation to explain the mutation of two primitive consciousnesses into self-consciousness and its *logical* development into a higher unity of absolute knowledge. Through experience, simple sensuous certainty changes logically into perception and then mutates itself into *understanding*. Hegel then argues that consciousness turns logically into self-consciousness. Fully developed self-consciousness occurs only when two (or more) self-consciousnesses mutually recognize one another. We would not exist as a person unless another person acknowledged our existence. In Hegel's words, "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged."²⁹ The social context in which individuals develop self-consciousness is something that George Mead took seriously in theorizing the self (see [chapter 16](#)).

At the initial encounter the two primitive self-consciousnesses are perfectly symmetrical; neither would see the other as participating in Reason and committed to mutual recognition. Each demands to be

recognized by the other as “being-for-itself,” or having freedom, and wants to end the symmetry by dominating the other. “Absolute negativity” is what Hegel calls the freedom that is determined by the other. The symmetry of mutual recognition between the two self-consciousnesses is unstable; only oneself is to be recognized, the other recognizes. One will be master; the other will be slave. Since each primitive self-demands to be recognized by the other, a “life and death” struggle for recognition by the other ensues. Each combatant tries to prove to the other how free he or she is by killing the other and by risking his or her life in the struggle. The struggle contains a contradiction: if either combatant should actually be killed, the victorious self would be denied the desired recognition by the dead self-consciousness. The logical “experience” of self-consciousness shows that both combatants must emerge from the struggle alive. Indeed, one must surrender to the other self, if there is to be any conferral of the desired recognition. The self that surrenders out of fear of death, abandoning its effort to be recognized, will become the slave. The dominant self-consciousness, who is recognized by the slave, becomes the master. The slave labors for the master.

In the master-slave relation each self learns through experience that they are actually the opposite of what they initially take themselves to be. The master takes himself to manifest freedom and unfettered power. However, he does not produce but consumes, and, paradoxically, despite his freedom he is in fact *dependent* on the labor of the slave. Further, the master wants recognition from an *equal* other but obtains recognition only from a subordinate reduced to an object and a means: a slave. The slave, by contrast, takes herself to be wholly unfree, but learns that she does in fact experience an *independent* consciousness or spirit of her own. Through labor the slave learns self-respect and realizes that she, too, has a certain power to transform things: “the bondsman [slave] realizes that it is precisely in his [*sic*] work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own,”³⁰ albeit “a freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude ... it is a skill which is a master over some things, but not over the universal power and the whole of objective being.”³¹ Hegel’s master-slave relation logically mutates to a new shape of self-consciousness that renders fully explicit the master’s state of dependence and the slave’s independent consciousness. This truth was always there, implicitly, unconsciously, or, in the

Hegelian language affected by Marx, “in-itself”; the *experience* renders it explicit, consciously or “for itself.”

As each self learns of its reversed relation to being, it brings in its wake a new higher unity, one that is enriched and made self-conscious by the experience of contradiction and antagonism: each self-benefits more from mutual economic cooperation than from domination. For Hegel, the dialectic is a self-transformative process and, because it embodies a theory of social change – the slave is the driving force – provides the epistemological paradigm for understanding human history.³² The philosophy of Hegel has been referred to as “the algebra of revolution.”³³ Hegel’s ideas, particularly the emphasis on social change, had a profound influence on Marx and a group of German intellectuals known as the Young Hegelians.

THE CRITIQUE OF HEGEL: FEUERBACH AND MARX’S PHILOSOPHY

At university Marx converted early from the romantic idealism of Kant to the dialectic idealism of Hegel. He changed from a romantic idealist who viewed human history as an arena of contesting ideas or Spirit, to a materialist who viewed human history as propelled by material forces. In 1836 Marx joined a group of radical intellectuals, including Ludwig Feuerbach, known as the Young Hegelians.

Although the Young Hegelians accepted Hegel’s central thesis that nothing is eternal or unchanging and that the trajectory of human history could be understood by dialectic logic, some members considered Hegel’s belief that German culture was a synthesis representing the zenith of civilization, while others, those on the Left, championed engagement in the dialectic in history. The Young Hegelians argued that religion was irrational and, moreover, acted as an impediment to social progress. The intellectual climate was secular idealism, which is echoed in Marx’s proclamation in the preface of his doctoral thesis: “Philosophy makes no secret of it. Prometheus’s confession – in a word, I detest all Gods.”³⁴

Marx’s critique of Hegel’s philosophy was strongly influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72). While Feuerbach accepted Hegel’s aphorism that human history contains an inner logic that is a dialectic

process, his central criticism was that Hegel, like Kant, had mystified truth. In *Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach argues that philosophy should not start from God or the Absolute but with the human being and the material world, the finite, the real, and acknowledge the primacy of the senses. Feuerbach uses the concepts of inversion and alienation to critique Hegel's philosophy. He argues that religion is an expression of mythical thinking that involves people unwittingly projecting their human essence onto a fictitious entity, whose image represents perfection. The human being, fearful and self-doubting, "sets God before him as the antithesis of himself ... God is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man, the absolutely negative."³⁵ God represents the externalization of an idealized human being. As such, this amounts to a process of inversion in which the *subject* – a creative human being – is reduced to the status of a *predicate* – a dependent attribute – by a *mystic being* – God – the product of the human imagination.

Feuerbach conceives the dialectic as a process of self-alienation because people divest themselves of their best qualities and make these qualities the property of a God. Hegel's philosophy, according to Feuerbach, remained a repository of religion and, as such, had to be exorcized to end the deception. He asserts that there must be an "inversion of this inversion" so that human beings recognize themselves as the real subject of the process, thereby regaining control over human attributes, desires, and qualities, and thus be able to restore to themselves their alienated "species-being" (*Gattungswesen*) or human nature. People would realize that *they* have created religion: when intellectuals understood the "true" relationship of thought to being, that is, "Being is the subject, thought is the predicate. Thought arises from being – being does not arise from thought."³⁶ Feuerbach still believed that alienation consists in, or is caused by, false consciousness, that human emancipation from religion is an intellectual process, and that the course of history is determined by the conceptual dialectic of the universal Spirit. As such, Feuerbach's thesis remained firmly within a Hegelian framework.³⁷

In the winter of 1843–4, Marx began to develop his radical critique of capitalism through a theoretical critique of Hegelian philosophy, not through empirical analysis of existing social conditions.³⁸ In so doing, Marx substituted idealism and liberalism with materialism and communism. In "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," published in 1844, Marx argues that religion served the

purpose of reparation for self-alienation and economic alienation. Though agreeing with Feuerbach that “man makes religion; religion does not make man,” Marx thought this observation was too abstract and ahistorical. Marx writes:

*Man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is the human world, the state, society. This state, this society produce religion, which is an inverted world consciousness, because they are an inverted world.... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.*³⁹

In other words, people live in such a world that invokes feelings of reverence or religious consciousness, which become the dominant way of thinking about themselves and their human condition. It is easy to interpret the famous epigram – “opium of the people” – as meaning that religious consciousness produces human misery or that *opium* is the problem. Both interpretations are incorrect. To understand Marx’s metaphor, we have to know that opium was in common use in Europe as a relief from pain and it produces some form of ecstasy in those who use it. If we view the use of opium as a *response* – albeit not a wise one especially if made regularly – to human suffering, we have something approaching Marx’s thesis.

The “God hypothesis” gives expression to a sense of the emptiness and worthlessness of human life – to alienation. Its social function is to anesthetize people to earthly misery: an illogical reaction to the finitude of the human condition. Marx’s conclusion is to change the material conditions that make false consciousness or illusion necessary: “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men is a demand for the real happiness.”⁴⁰ The phenomenon of religion, the disease, is primarily



Photo 4.3. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), a German philosopher, criticized Hegel for maintaining a religious world view. Karl Marx acknowledged Feuerbach’s intellectual achievements, particularly his views on religion and the limitations of the Hegelian dialectic.

alienated labor – a state of existence increasingly exacerbated by factory machinery in the hands of capitalists – as opposed to abstract ideas in the form of religion. Once alienated labor is abolished, and the cause removed, the symptom – religion – will wither on its own, Marx argues. Philosophers must be critical of material conditions, not only their religious reflection. Consequently, in *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), Marx declares that the chief defect of all hitherto philosophers is that they “have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”⁴¹ We can now begin to understand why religion is so important to Marx’s critique of idealist philosophy, for “the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.”⁴² His critique of religion ends with the categorical imperative to abolish all conditions that abase, enslave, and alienate human beings.

The concept of alienation figures prominently throughout Marx’s critique of German idealist philosophy. Central to Marx’s notion of alienation is the idea that human beings progressively forfeit to something (e.g., God) or someone (e.g., the capitalist) something that is the essence of their nature: principally, the control over their own attributes and labor. Marx addresses political alienation in “On the Jewish Question” (1844). In this work, Marx discusses how the state deprives people of the opportunity to attain the essence of their nature, and that this deprivation is a form of political alienation. Marx’s old mentor Bruno Bauer had argued that Jewish emancipation could not be achieved without the state ceasing to be Christian. Marx, however, countered that the simple secularization of the state was insufficient; that specific social elements had to be defeated in order to achieve genuine emancipation: “The question of the relation between political emancipation and religion becomes for us a question of the relation between political emancipation and human emancipation.”⁴³ For Marx, human emancipation necessitated democratic control over all human activity.

Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* contains a critique of Feuerbach’s account of materialism. Although Marx accepted much of Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel, he argued that the real relation of thought to human life was not Feuerbach’s human nature but the social and economic system of production. In Marx’s inversion, thought is a product of these concrete conditions. The opening page contains the essence of Marx’s critique: “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of

Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectivity.”⁴⁴ Marx concludes that Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel merely substituted one mystic for another. In the second thesis, Marx explains his principle of the unity of theory and practice: “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question.”⁴⁵ Theory without practice is a form of pure cognitive gymnastics – graceful perhaps, but ultimately sterile and of no consequence. And, in the third thesis, Marx identifies the agent of social change: “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing ... forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself.”⁴⁶

After exposing religion as a product of social alienation, Marx applied himself to studying material conditions or political economy, the outcome of which is found in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. Known as the *Paris Manuscripts*, these were not published until 1927. The documents contain a critique of the Scottish political economist Adam Smith and the English economist David Ricardo, culminating with an analysis of “alienated labour,” a description of communism. Marx’s discussions on communism and the workings of capitalism are examined in [chapters 5](#) and [6](#).

DIALECTICS AND METHODOLOGY

Here we examine how Marx extended Hegelian and Feuerbachian dialectics. Marx begins by acknowledging Feuerbach’s achievements, particularly in making the social relationship of “man to man” the basic principle of the theory of human social development. In the early twentieth century, Marx was venerated as the architect, with Engels, of the philosophy of “dialectical materialism.” Posthumous elaborations of Marx’s dialectics were constructed beginning with Engels’s *Anti-Dhring* in 1878, but not without controversy. Marx’s contribution to the methodology of social science was his use of contradiction and the idea of unintended consequences of human action. The genealogy of Marx’s methodology is, without doubt, derived from his critique of Hegelian and Feuerbachian dialectics. For Marx, Hegel’s master-slave dialectic

was ambiguous and written from an idealistic standpoint. In *Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx did recognize the positive elements of Hegel's dialectic: "The outstanding thing ... is first that Hegel conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation ... thus grasps the essence of labour and comprehends objective man ... as the outcome of man's *own labour*."⁴⁷ However, Marx criticized Hegel's dialectic because it still harbors uncritical idealism: "The appropriation of man's essential powers [is] ... only an appropriation occurring in *consciousness*, in *pure thought* – i.e., in *abstraction*."⁴⁸

Although Hegel only recognizes "abstractly mental labour," Marx defined his position as consistently humanist and as avoiding idealism, which recognizes "real, corporeal man, man with his feet firmly on the solid ground, man exhaling and inhaling all the forces of nature."⁴⁹ Marx rejected Hegel's notion of Mind or Spirit [*Geist*] as an independent reality and replaced its supposed antithesis to the external world by the antithesis between human beings and their *social* being.⁵⁰ For Marx, Hegel's philosophy reduces human beings and history to an abstract mental process, which constitutes a form of alienation. Contrary to Hegel's thesis, the human mind is the totality of mental powers and human activities within a given society.

Marx extends the idea of psychological contradiction found in the master-slave analysis to the theory of social contradiction. Marx employs "contradiction" to analyze social change. Over time, the two reciprocally dependent productive forces and the relations of production come into conflict or "contradiction" and turn into "fetter" on human progress.⁵¹ Marx explains his methodology in *Capital I* this way:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, ... is the demiurgos [the creator] of the real world.... With me, the ideal is nothing less than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought.⁵²

Marx believes that Hegel is close to the truth. The human mind and the world do change together. And history is an arena of human

alienation. But Marx argues that the human mind is not the creator of the universe. Marx acknowledges his intellectual debt to Hegel by extracting from Hegelian dialectic “the rational kernel within the mystical shell”⁵³ to develop a “materialist dialectic.” To demystify Hegel’s logic, Marx believed it must be “inverted” or “turned upside down” before it could assume a rational shape. For Marx, the “mystical shell” of Hegel’s dialectic is his belief that God exists, and the “rational kernel” is Hegel’s idea of the society, as structured and characterized by inherent contradictions and unintended consequences – actions by actors that do not always turn out as they expect.

Marx accepts Hegel’s vision of reality but rejects the metaphysics that motivates his vision.⁵⁴ For Marx, any dialectical perception of nature is subordinate to the dialectic between human activities and nature, which arises from human beings satisfying their everyday economic needs through their labor. Hegel’s psychological contradiction characterized the three stages as, respectively, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Marx’s social contradiction follows a similar three-stage sequence: Stage one, society begins as a primitive, undifferentiated community. Stage two, the negation of the first stage, occurs with the emergence of a class structure, exploitation of labor, conflict, and the disintegration of community. Stage three, the negation of the negation, reinstates a higher-level community. It is the synthesis of stages one and two. Marx’s dialectical method offers an epistemological paradigm for understanding social change.⁵⁵

CRITICISMS

Marx’s writings are open to a number of different interpretations and emphases. To write about the intellectual assault on Marx’s philosophy would be almost tantamount to writing a history of modern philosophy and would go well beyond the aims of this chapter. This is not to say that we cannot identify a number of criticisms of Marx’s early works.⁵⁶ Marx draws on a constellation of European philosophers, and one obvious criticism is that the origins of his philosophical concepts are “indisputably Western.”⁵⁷ Marx never studied religion in any detail, but his discussions underscore that religion is a product of social alienation. People create an imaginary figure known as God in order to find solace from

their suffering in the real world, the cause of their suffering is alienation caused by a particular type of social organization, and religious beliefs and values provide justification of social inequality – the theory of ideology. One possible criticism to Marx’s hypothesis is that traditional theology is right, and Marx is wrong. There is a God who created all things and demands our worship. For those who believe in God or in a higher force, Marx is wrong. Critics also point out that, although there is evidence to support the *secularization thesis* within postmodernity, new religious movements and Christian and Islamic fundamentalism challenge the notion that religious commitment in all its manifestations is about solace or a bourgeois conspiracy to keep down the “lower orders.”

An orthodox critique of Marx’s dialectic method is that it lacks credibility because it denies the basic law of non-contradiction. This law holds that the presence of a contradiction in a statement or proposition invalidates its claim to truth. For example, we cannot simultaneously say “It is snowing” and “It is not snowing.” Formal logic denies that contradictions exist in reality, and, if they do exist in thought, they signify an error and have to be expunged in order to reveal truth. Marx’s insistence that contradictions exist in capitalist reality is, critics claim, a repudiation of formal logic. Marx’s use of the dialectic logic, critics argue, also exhibits a doctrinaire or “mechanical” use of the concept and a unidirectional notion of human history. This allegedly doctrinaire dialectic is counterposed against the *genuine dialectic* defined in terms of interaction, reciprocity, and multiple causation. In reply, it may be said that dialectic contradictions are different from the contradictions referred to in formal thinking. From this perspective, the principle of non-contradiction has limited value when one is studying a complex system in motion, and, thus, dialectic contradictions do not repudiate the laws of thought but augment and qualify them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Marx’s philosophical concepts were fashioned from a constellation of Western philosophers. Specifically, there was continuity in the thinking of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx that certainly looked back at least to the ideas of Immanuel Kant. Hegel provided a major critique of Kantian idealism, and his account of the master-slave dialectic gave sociological

form to his philosophy. The paradigmatic account of the master and slave relation, with its contradictory elements of antagonism as well as cooperation, resonates in Marx's critical theory of class and social change.⁵⁸ The sociological implications of Hegel's concept of recognition have provided inspiration for twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminists to interrogate gender relations and inequality, and for the Black consciousness movement.

Marx's methodology is materialist. For Marx, societies develop and change historically because of changes in preexisting material factors and social interactions, such as labor, technologies, social conflict, and so on. As Marx constitutes society in materialist terms, it recognizes that "people have agency: people, individually and collectively, can think, act and change the society of which they are a part, albeit within the resources and other limits that exist in particular societies."⁵⁹ Marx's materialist methodology and extensive writings on the role of land and rent in the economy offer inspiration for modern inquiry of city life. In *Marx's Theory of Land, Rent and Cities*, for example, political economist Don Munro explicitly adopts Marx's materialist methodology and draws on his writings to explain how land and rent shape contemporary cities in the Global North and the Global South and the lives of people living in cities.

As we have noted, there can be few social theorists whose fate it has been to be so persistently misunderstood as Marx. And, given that an epistemologically distorted form of Marxism was employed to legitimize industrialization and denial of basic human rights in the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, we could be forgiven for assuming that Marx's philosophy has little to contribute to understanding the myriad challenges facing us in the twenty-first century. The works of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, for example, are read not because they have discovered the path to utopia but because they are valued for their insight, originality, rigor, vision, and so on. Similarly, Marx's critique of idealism is worthy of attention for more than historical reasons. Confronted with contemporary discourses on Christianity and Islam, his philosophical concepts are insightful, suggestive, and remain a fertile source for social theorizing.⁶⁰

As to the relevance of Marx's dialectic, it can be argued that, despite all the knowledge and sophisticated information technologies we possess, we still don't know how to conceptualize the intensified conflict over the earth's shrinking reserves of natural resources, how to think

usefully about societal and political solutions to global warming, or, in general, how to make connections between apparently disparate processes and events. Marx's dialectic provides us a way to think philosophically about the changes and innumerable instances of contradiction that lie at the heart of the processes of globalization and global heating; for these reasons, we suggest Marx's dialectic is of lasting significance.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 What does Marx mean when he argues that human consciousness does not determine the social being, but rather that material conditions determine human consciousness?
- 2 Explain Marx's metaphor that religion is the "opium of the people." Why is it often interpreted incorrectly?
- 3 Is Marx's dialectical reasoning relevant in postmodern social research?

5

Karl Marx: Theory of History and Social Change

Central to Marx's philosophical work is that the labor necessary to satisfy individual and collective material needs leads to ever more complex forms of productive activity and social engagement. It is this view of human interaction with nature and with each other that forms the rudiments of Marx's theory of history. At Marx's funeral, Friedrich Engels paid tribute to him for discovering the primary motive force in human history: "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of the development of human history."¹ Marx never used the term *historical materialism*, which was coined by Engels; instead he preferred to call his approach "the materialist conception of history."² Like Hegel, Marx believed that the French Revolution had been a positive event, but, unlike Hegel, he made the Revolution a central concern for the science of humanity. For Marx, the French Revolution inaugurated a new age of humanity.³ The French Revolution helped Marx develop many of his basic concepts, which provide an explanatory theory about society's different forms of social life, such as class structure, ideology, and the sources of social change and stability over time.

As we pass the bicentennial of Marx's birth, are his ideas on class and ideology applicable to our postmodern world, or do we now live in a "classless" post-ideological age? In the 1950s, the United States was described as a "classless society." And, in the 1990s, British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that "the class war is over." In the



Photo 5.1. Marx believed that capitalism destroyed the pleasure associated with socially productive labor. Consequently, humans are alienated from their product, productive activity, species being, and other people. Under capitalism, people are unable to exercise and experience a distinctively human capacity that is critical for human freedom – to make and remake nature. All forms of alienation are thus, according to Marx, located in the real world, and it is necessary to change the conditions that cause alienated labor.

third decade of the twenty-first century, extreme inequality has put capitalism and class under the public microscope. Marx's theory of history constitutes one of the central elements in his social theory. This chapter examines the core elements of the general theory. To begin, however, we need to recognize the importance Marx gave to human nature and to labor in formulating his theory of history.

HUMAN NATURE

Marx's understanding of human history is based on the fundamental premise that people must obtain their basic necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter, and so on – by cooperating with others and by entering into a conscious relation with nature. The most important historical act is the act of productive labor. People develop and exercise their human faculties to transform nature to satisfy their material needs. The human species, according to Marx, is different from all other animal species because it alone produces its own means of subsistence and creates something in reality that previously existed only in an individual's imagination. In his words:

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 bees

is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects reality.⁴

Marx calls this process whereby humans create external objects from their own imagination *objectification*. We can begin to understand Marx's concept of objectification by thinking of the work of an artist. An artwork is a representation of the artist's imagination – a representation of an idea that exists in the artist's head before the commencement of the project. Thus, the artwork is an objectification of the artist. Work, for Marx, provides the means through which humans can realize the fullness of their humanity. It is through work, an essentially social process, that people individually and collectively transform nature, themselves, and their consciousness and, in so doing, they change society. This is human agency and the basis of Marx's materialism.

ALIENATION

Exploitation of labor and alienation are two fundamental flaws in capitalism, according to Marx. These concepts play two distinct roles in his economic theory and his theory of history. Both exploitation and alienation enter into his normative assessment of what is dysfunctional about capitalism and, conversely, what is attractive about communism.⁵ Further, both are part of Marx's social theory to explain the sources of conflict, the collapse of capitalism, and the transition to communism. Marx's theory of history is based on philosophical concepts such as self-estrangement, directly drawn from Feuerbach; on ideas about communism, taken from French socialists François-Noël Babeuf (Gracchus) and Charles Fourier; and on his understanding of capitalism, derived from Adam Smith's political economy. For Marx, capitalism perverts the relation between human nature and productive power – thereby stultifying human creativity – and therefore is the locus of *alienated labor*. Alienation occurs because men and women (and children) forfeit the right to control their own labor when they enter the employment of the capitalist (i.e., when they sell their labor power). This means that workers lose autonomy over when and how work should be undertaken. Thus, there is a subordination of workers to their employers (or

managers who act as “agents of capital”), which means work becomes a dehumanizing activity:

[Under] the capitalist system ... all means for the development of production ... mutilate the laborer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil.⁶

The following tour de force, found in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, contains Marx’s classic statement on alienated labor under capitalism:

The object which labour produces – labor’s product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer.... The worker is related to the *product of his labor* as to an *alien* object. For on this premise, it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes ... the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own.... The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.... But the estrangement is manifested not only in the result but in the *act of production* – within the *producing activity* itself.... Estranged labor turns ... man’s *species being* ... into a being *alien* to him, into a *means* to his *individual* existence. It estranges man’s own body from him, as it does external nature and his spiritual essence, his *human being*. An immediate consequence ... is the estrangement of *man from man*.⁷

This dense passage can be read in more than one way. What follows is the traditional interpretation in which Marx contends that humans experience four discrete but related types of alienation: alienation from their product, from their own productive activity, from their own nature or species being, and from other human beings.

The first type of labor alienation is from the *product*. Extensive use of division of labor and machinery means that workers have no creative input into how products are designed or made. In this sense, the product confronts the individual worker “as something alien, as a power independent of the producer.” The more sophisticated the productive process becomes, as narrower divisions of labor and increasingly advanced machinery are applied to it, the less significant is the individual worker. In a less obvious way, humans collectively become alienated from the products they create because of two related concepts: mystification and domination. Everything individuals use or encounter in their daily lives is the result of accumulative learning. This process creates a mystery around products because few people have any real understanding of how everyday products actually work or are made. Take, for example, generative artificial intelligence applications, such as ChatGPT – the effect is that “we are strangers in our own world.”⁸

The second type of labor alienation is “within the producing activity itself.” The long-term tendency to extend the division of labor and introduce new technology makes work repetitive, monotonous, and dehumanizing: the worker becomes an “appendage of the machine.”⁹ Marx’s notion of alienated labor is an extension of Feuerbach’s analysis of religious alienation. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx writes, “Just as in religion ... the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual – that is, operates on him as an alien, ... in the same way the worker’s activity ... belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.”¹⁰

The third type of alienation is from the human species. Marx uses the term *species being*, taken from Feuerbach, to refer to the free ability of humans to create a world in which to manifest their full creative nature. The human essence is concrete and defined by the human capacity to create objects:

It is just in the working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a *species being*. The object of labor is, therefore, the *objectification of man’s species life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created.¹¹

But, under capitalism, work embodies the opposite qualities: labor is repetitive, boring, and mentally incapacitating. Work is, as a woman factory worker put it, “the blank patch between one brief evening and the next.”¹²

The fourth type of alienation is “the estrangement of man from man.” Again, Marx draws on Feuerbach’s analysis of religion to capture the experience. In the intellectual world, “religious self-estrangement necessarily appears in the relationship of the layman to the priest.... In the real, practical world self-estrangement can only become manifest through the real practical relationship to other men.”¹³ The essential point is that capitalist production alienates humans from fellow human beings as well as from the communal aspects of their lives. This alienation occurs because people are drawn into a culture in which humans are integrated into society, above all, as consumers.¹⁴ By being continuously engaged in the individual aspect of a consumer culture, people have little time for or interest in communal *species essence*. Alienation is an objective condition, and, although it has subjective implications, a “happy” worker is no less alienated than a bored one.

THE GENERAL THESIS

Marx is explicit about his purpose for understanding modernity. His oeuvres are linked to his political project to *change* society. The materialist conception of history has two sides to it. On the one hand, it is a general theory explaining the primacy of the economic in social life, how productive systems work, and the underlying motive force for tension, conflict, and social change. On the other hand, it is a theory of the historical stages of modes of production, which is the basis for social revolution. The preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is the canonical text that serves as a “guiding thread” for Marx’s work:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production, which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real

foundation, on which raises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.¹⁵

Three central concepts of Marx's general thesis can be derived from this passage: productive forces, relations of production, and superstructure. The *productive forces* refer to two factors: the "means of production" and "labor power." Although there are some problems of definition, what qualifies as a productive force is an instrument or facility that must be ownable, progressively developed by humans, and capable of being utilized by labor power.¹⁶ In every stage of history, men and women utilize nonhuman resources such as tools, machinery, and raw materials – the means of production – and harness human resources in the form of physical strength, skill, or knowledge – labor power – to satisfy their needs. The means of production vary with the different ways that human beings attain their subsistence. For example, a fisher needs a net, and a software designer uses more complex instruments of production. Concomitantly, the type of labor power used by the farmer or the software designer differs according to the specific ways these individuals attain their economic needs.

The *relations of production* may be defined in terms of the ownership and non-ownership of the means of production,¹⁷ but the term also refers to the social relations and classes that are formed. Under capitalism, the relations of production that workers enter into, "indispensable and independent of their will,"¹⁸ differ from those of feudalism. Workers are compelled to sell their labor power (*Arbeitskraft*) to an owner of the means of production in order to satisfy their own economic needs. In so doing, they also enter into relations that place them under the control of the owner. The forces and the relations of production constitute the economic *base* of a society. According to Marx, people's economic activity, their "mode of production in material life," is what primarily characterizes their social life, their class position based on a set of material interests, and a society's economic base determines both the institutions and dominant ideas in that society. This is Marx's first premise: the level of development of a society's

productive forces will determine the nature of its social form. Why should this be the case? As we have discussed, factory production introduced specialized technology and occupations, which changed patterns of ownership, the class structure, and instilled new patterns of social behavior. As Vivek Chibber observes, “the defining characteristic of capitalism is a class structure with asset-owning capitalists on one side and a class of asset-poor workers on the other.”¹⁹ An equivalent transformation in present society is the global phenomenon of artificial intelligence (AI) of the so-called Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR). The apparent primacy of economic affairs over social processes illustrates the materialist nature of Marx’s theory of history.

The *superstructure* in Marx’s socioeconomic model includes the legal, political, religious, ideological, and cultural processes and institutions of society. The legal and political architecture, for instance, embraces criminal and civil law, the law courts, and parliamentary systems. In Marx’s view, these noneconomic features are important for the continued existence of the economic base. The economic “base” and the social “superstructure,” therefore, constitute a totality, the different parts explicable in terms of the whole. The nature of the relationship between the superstructure and the economic base introduces Marx’s second premise: the economic base will “determine” (*bestimmen*) the social superstructure of a society, and, moreover, the superstructure and consciousness will change as the economic base undergoes change. Here lies the genesis of Marx’s theory of ideology. Critics of Marx regard the idea that the economic base ultimately determines the nature of civilization, the social “superstructure,” as a form of determinism. Marx and Engels, however, never meant to suggest that the economic structure of society determines a specific culture, set of ideas, or politics. To borrow a phrase from the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, there is no suggestion of a “necessary connexion” or causal glue between the economic base and the social superstructure.²⁰ The economic structure of society does not generate only those ideas that serve capitalists’ interests. If this were the case, Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791–2) or Marx’s *Capital* would not exist. The direction of travel between the base and superstructure is not just one way. Marx’s premise is simply that the base affects the superstructure and “sets limits” rather than “determines” life experiences and that it is no coincidence that both the state and social consciousness correspond to the economic

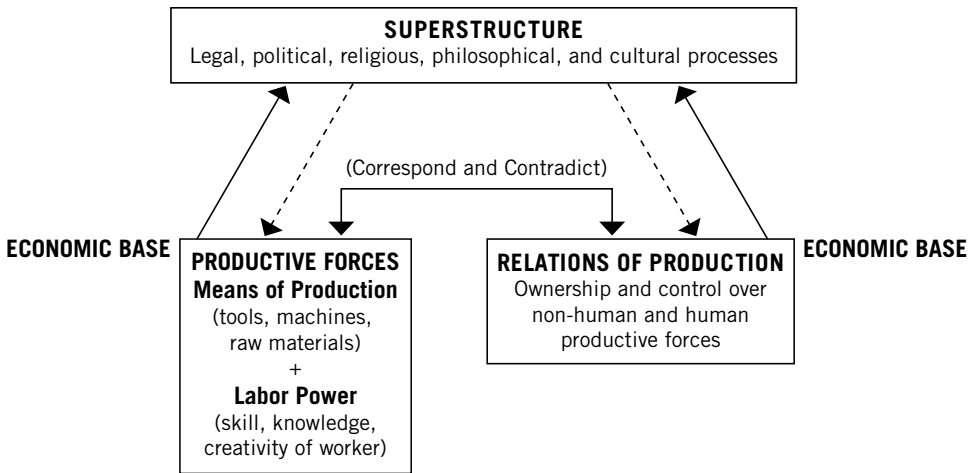


Figure 5.1. Conceptual schema of Marx's triadic model of industrial capitalism

structure of society – not least because the dominant social class has the capacity to control the material means by which ideas are produced and disseminated.²¹ For heuristic purposes, [figure 5.1](#) shows Marx's socioeconomic model, which can be used to explain, in a concrete way, a society.

The notion of *mode of production* is not fully defined by Marx, but it conceptualizes the totality and richness of a society comprising both productive forces and relations of production and also its superstructure at each historical epoch. Thus, the precapitalist feudal mode of production displaces ancient forms of production, such as the use of slaves, and the capitalist mode of production disrupts and displaces feudal forms of production, such as domestic handcraft workers, to the logic of factory production.

STAGES OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Like Saint-Simon and Comte in the early nineteenth century, Marx viewed human history as passing through stages of development. These various stages of social forms serve to test Marx's general theory. As Marx explains it, a particular system of forces and relations of

production and a class system that develops on the basis of these relationships define different types of society. In *The German Ideology*, five social forms are described: tribal (*Stammeigentum*) or primitive communism, ancient communal, feudalism, capitalism, and communism. The precapitalist modes of production were conservative and underdeveloped because of low labor productivity. The first precapitalist mode of production is *tribal*, which describes a rudimentary system of social organization in which people live together principally by “hunting and fishing, by the rearing of beasts or, in the highest stage, agriculture.... The division of labour is at this stage still very elementary,”²² and the social structure is limited to the family or kinship groups of “patriarchal family chieftains, below them the members of the tribe, finally slaves.”²³ Property is communal, and there is no developed system of class relations. Tribalism did embody a degree of gender equality among non-slaves.²⁴

The *ancient* mode of production, such as existed in ancient Rome and Greece, describes a form of society in which communities create cities and develop complex civil structures. Productive forces are based on agricultural and rudimentary industry, with more division of labor. The social structure begins to change too. In particular, a system of class relations develops, and the “antagonism of town and country” intensifies.²⁵ Marx devotes relatively little time to analyzing precapitalist tribal and ancient societies, but he suggests that the construction of irrigation networks and the emergence of a central bureaucracy are examples of the primacy of the productive forces.

The *feudal* mode of production is still predominantly agricultural and community based, but “the directly producing class standing against it is not the slaves, but the enserfed small peasantry.”²⁶ The feudal mode of production was based on subsistence agriculture, with simple commodity production undertaken by a multiplicity of small capitalists and traditional, skilled guild masters and artisans. Extensive rules governed the making and selling of commodities under the early craft guilds. In terms of relations of production, there was little differentiation between master and journeyman. One historian, describing the position of the journeyman to his master, goes so far as to state that it was “rather that of a companion-worker than a hired servant.”²⁷ A distinctive social structure developed with “the differentiation of princes, nobility, clergy and peasants in the country, and masters, journeymen, apprentices and



Photos 5.2 and 5.3. For Marx, different social forms throughout the centuries are to be explained by a changing complex interplay of productive factors (e.g., contrast a hand-held sickle or scythe with a mechanized combine harvester) and the social and ideological spheres of society.

soon also the rabble of casual laborers in the towns.”²⁸ The feudal legal system defined the ownership and privileges of the landowning aristocratic class. The accumulated wealth of the town-based bourgeois class intensified the conflicts between rural and town interests. Marx notes, “As soon as feudalism is fully developed, there also arises antagonism to the towns.”²⁹

The *capitalist* mode of production, with its antecedents in the development of a market-oriented economy, population growth, and improved domestic agricultural techniques, became historically significant after the rise of the urban bourgeoisie and the decline of feudalism. In volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx explains the emergence of industrial capitalism by identifying the fettering of the productive forces by feudal relations of production:

This [feudal] mode of production ... is compatible only with a system of production, and a society, moving within narrow and more or less primitive bounds.... At a certain stage of development, it brings forth the material agencies for its own dissolution. From that moment new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society; but the old social organization fetters them and keeps them down. It must be annihilated; it is annihilated.³⁰

This passage illustrates the complexity of Marx’s dialectic process. The passage suggests that social change is *not* determined by the economic alone. A complex division of labor and the relation between formally free wage labor and private capital defines *industrial capitalism*. The transition to a large-scale mode of production saw the emergence of new relations of production and modes of life. The new working population consisted of landless workers for whom selling their labor power was their sole source of subsistence, and the capitalists extracted a surplus of production through dominance of the wage nexus.

For the new urban bourgeoisie, with their own economic interests, the feudal system was archaic and socially rigid. The ascendant urban bourgeoisie abolished the privileges of the rural aristocracy, enacted parliamentary legislation, and created a legal system that reflected bourgeois power and suited the needs of an industrial society. Wage legislation and welfare reforms – for example, the Poor Law Act of 1834 – forced long working hours and discipline on landless urban workers. There

were also ideological changes. Enlightenment thinking encouraged a moral individualism that stressed individual choice, responsibility, and a strong work ethic. Thus, under capitalism, the forces and relations of production changed, as did the forms of consciousness, which were part of the superstructure. The three main elements of the totality, as depicted in [figure 5.1](#), are in harmony again.

For Marx, capitalism is the last antagonistic society. He explains the coexistence of order and conflict through the concept of “contradiction” – an irreconcilable friction. Capitalism’s inherent contradictions become the driving force for its replacement by the communist mode of production. In Marx’s words, “Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the *actual* phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and recovery.”³¹ Under communism, there is no alienation because, writes Marx, “human labor is fulfilling, free from coercion, and will correspond to humans’ nature.”³² Thus “socialized production” makes it possible for humans to work as artists, thereby allowing their creative powers to be expressed.

MARX’S THEORY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Marx’s conception of history seeks to explain the source of social change. He identifies two fundamental drivers of social change. Social change is driven, first, by contradictions between the forces and relations of production and, second, by class antagonisms. Marx offers a highly complex account of his first position. A standard reading of the 1859 preface and of the historical chapters of *Capital* is that, at the initial stage of each mode of production, productive forces develop rapidly in society. The relations of production help this process of development as they complement, or *correspond* to, the productive force. Over time, the two reciprocally dependent forces and relations of production come into conflict, or *contradiction*, and turn into “fetters” on human progress. Marx explains the first driver of social change like this:

At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or ... with the property relations within which they have

been at work hitherto ... these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is ... rapidly transformed. In considering such a transformation a distinction should always be made between the material transformation ... and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.³³

The first two sentences of this canonical passage introduce the notion of *fettering*, which has been interpreted two ways. By fettering relations of production, all further improvement in productive forces is prevented; this is the *absolute* conception of fettering. Alternatively, fettering can be conceived of as occurring when existing relations of production are suboptimal for the further development of productive forces; this is referred to as the *relative* conception of fettering.

At the core of Marx's analysis is the notion that the system of production of a given society will eventually exhaust its creative and productive potential.³⁴ Marx also opines that social revolution installs productively superior relations of production. However, an epoch of social revolution cannot be successful unless it follows from a real change in the economic base, as Marx argues: "No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and the new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself."³⁵ This text, when taken literally, supports the absolute conception of fettering whereby a social revolution occurs when, and only when, obsolete relations of production fetter all further improvements in the productive forces of society.³⁶

There are several problems with this theory, not least its determinism. The trajectory of human history is explained by an inevitable internal inanimate logic. There is a single "driver" of history – productive forces – and these falter, convulse, and throw up different social structures as they transition. Thus, it is not people who make their own history; it is the productive forces, which have a life of their own.³⁷

Marx himself offered an alternative theory to his own productive-force determinism. In this alternative approach, Marx gives primacy to class structure – a class of capitalists who own and control production assets

and workers who sell their labor power to capitalists. These social relations of production are repeatedly emphasized in Marx's work when he refers to class relations as the "foundation" or the "basis" of a society. Marx claims that under capitalism the separation of the worker from the means of production and wage labor was the basis for capitalist production.

In this interpretation of Marx's theory of social change, the mechanism that concomitantly produces social order and conflict is human agency. Capitalists and workers must interact and cooperate to achieve their material needs – profit and basic survival needs respectively. These social relations that govern the production of goods and services are the source of social stability and order. On the other hand, because the capitalist class obtain their profit from exploiting and coercing labor, they are also the primary source of social tension and conflict. As Shloma Avineri explains, Marx adopts Hegel's concept of a "universal class," which becomes the foundation of Marx's critical theory of social classes. In each historical epoch, a particular antagonistic class is responsible for the transformation from one mode of production to another. It is "a dynamic concept, whose *bearers change from epoch to epoch*."³⁸ In a feudal society, the urban bourgeoisie became the class responsible for ousting feudal social relations, whereas in capitalist society the waged working classes are responsible for overthrowing capitalist social relations. Marx declares that "men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out."³⁹ Hegel's universal class became for Marx an explicating intellectual tool for understanding social change. Indeed, it became the canonical opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."⁴⁰

Therefore, for Marx, the most distinctive form of social stratification in *all* societies is dynamic class divisions. This universal feature is viewed through an economic lens in terms of those who own productive assets and live off the labor of others and those who do productive labor. Hegel's master and slave dialectic, with its inherent contradictions and antagonisms, finds resonance here in Marx's analyses of classes. For Marx, the capitalist and proletariat define each other by the *relation* of each to the means of production. Under capitalism, transformational social change arises from class structure – the antagonistic relations between the bourgeoisie and proletariat: "The bourgeois relations of

production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of the bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism.”⁴¹

For Marx, classes are change agents, but the precise dynamics of how society is transformed through *class struggles* is ambiguous, and there is a tension in Marx’s thought on the primacy of the productive forces to which he was committed by his general theory. For example, precapitalist societies did experience class struggle; there were slave rebellions in the ancient world and serf riots in the medieval, feudal period. But action by *oppressed* slaves did not cause the collapse of ancient society. Similarly, in feudal England, the antagonistic classes were not “lord and serf” but the rural aristocracy and the urban bourgeoisie. The serfs – the oppressed class – were rather marginal historical actors in the transformation process. Social change occurred because feudalism imposes fetters on the economy, and the merchant capitalists, *not* the serfs, were the revolutionary class who dismantled the fetters of the obsolete guilds and caused the demise of feudalism.

Did Marx believe that class struggles inevitably generate historical change? There is certainly textual evidence in his writings that support such an interpretation. Describing the social revolution from feudalism to capitalism, Marx declares, “The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.”⁴² Yet there is also textual evidence that Marx did not ascribe to a deterministic conception of social change. His celebrated statement – “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 found, given and transmitted from the past”⁴³ – recognizes that human agency is constrained by the structural limits within a given society and that social change is not the inevitable consequence of these limits. Marx’s dual theory identifies structure and human agency as the prime drivers of social change. On the one hand, the tendency for the forces and relations of production to enter into a structural contradiction creates fetters on the productive forces. On the other hand, class formation – the process by which workers

engage in collective action around their economic interests – is contingent on a fluid composite of economic, political, religious, and other social factors.

SOCIAL CLASS

As we have already seen, the guiding thread of Marx's general theory had convinced him that, to understand human history and capitalist modernity, one had to analyze the development of productive forces and the social relations of production. Marx's general theory holds that the internal dynamics of each mode of production predicts that class relations, class conflict, and ideology principally flow from the economic structure. Marx explains that social classes perform an essential role in the dialectic process; men and women, not productive forces, engage in revolution and develop societies when historical circumstances provide them with the motives and opportunities for doing so. His account of class is intended to explain the prevalence and forms of collective action in terms of the *class position* and *common interests* of the people engaged in economic and political conflict.⁴⁴

Two questions arise: What are classes? How many classes are there? Unfortunately, Marx nowhere offers a systematic analysis of class devoted to the first question, but we know that he rejected the theory that class is stratified purely according to income and wealth. He wrote, "The size of one's purse is a purely quantitative distinction, whereby any two individuals of the same class may be incited against one another at will."⁴⁵

As to the second question, in the polemical *Communist Manifesto*, society is characterized as a bifurcated structure, consisting of "two great classes," with wholly irreconcilable common interests, and class struggles are expressed purely in bipolar terms as a conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.⁴⁶ A salient point here, one frequently missed, is that the *Manifesto* was crafted primarily as a political document to inspire and energize European labor movements in a specific historical context; it was never intended as a treatise on social class. The beginning of a more complete answer to our second question can be found in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), where Marx identifies seven classes: bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, financiers,

landlords, free farmers, proletariat, and the lumpenproletariat.⁴⁷ In his more academic work, *Capital III*, Marx states that wage laborers, capitalists, and landowners constitute the “three big classes” of modern capitalist society, but he also mentions “middle and intermediate” classes.⁴⁸

As Marx conceives of classes, they have a dynamic or subjective element: classes *potentially* develop or arise out of the experience of a given economic system. In the capitalist mode of production, while class structure is made up of several divisions there are two principal classes: capitalists and the proletariat or working class. Marx explains class formation – the process by which each class engage in collective action around their economic interests – by drawing on Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. He famously describes the social process as transitioning from a *class-in-itself* to a *class-for-itself*. That is, when a class of people occupy a common position, as capitalist and worker, within the same space and time as to the means of production, share a common interest, and act collectively to discover a consciousness that promotes their common interests, they then constitute a *class-for-itself*.

Class formation therefore might be gauged by the development of social movements, such as trade unions and labor-oriented political parties, and ideologies that promote class interests. Based on these criteria, unsurprisingly, Marx was sometimes hesitant as to whether the proletariat had developed sufficiently to constitute itself as a class. He observed, “The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself.”⁴⁹ He also noted obstacles: “This organization of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves.”⁵⁰

It is common to read in many introductory sociology texts that Marx advanced a “simple two-class model” of social class. When the textual evidence demonstrates that Marx never articulated such a crude model, how can we explain this common misreading of Marx’s ideas on class? In part, it can be explained by the fact that Marx predicts the demise of capitalism through the triumph of class struggle. His methodology also explains the misreading of his critical theory of social classes.⁵¹ Marx isolates the “essential” labor-capital relation to analyze capitalism’s

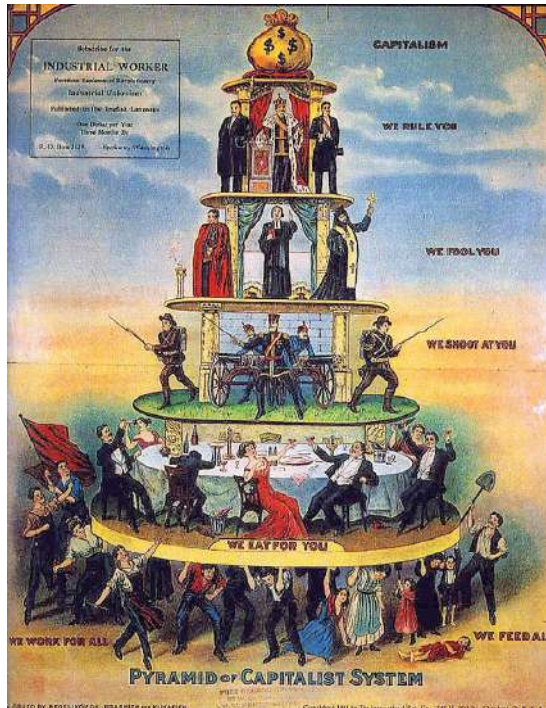


Photo 5.4. Marx's account of class is intended to explain the prevalence and forms of collective social conflict in terms of the class position and common interests of the people engaging in it.

specific historical character, much as bourgeois economists use the concept of *ceteris paribus* to freeze all other determinate factors when isolating the price-quantity relation. Thus, the first volume of *Capital* operates at a high level of abstraction with its assumption of a two-class model, while the subsequent two volumes extend and deepen the analysis by examining “many capitals” and, thus, industrial capitalism as an historical-empirical reality.⁵² Marx did not “discover” classes in modern society; class structure was well known to historians and political economists. Marx’s innovation was to construct a theory of how class agency is related to particular historical epochs in the development of the forces and relations of production in society.⁵³

IDEOLOGIES

Marx's critique of ideology has been one of his most persuasive ideas.⁵⁴ His theory of ideologies not only explains how people come to hold their erroneous views about society; it also assigns a positive role to social theories in the change process. He considered that ideologies are both effect and cause of the reality that they purport to explain.⁵⁵ Marx held that, in all class societies, the dominant class develops and disseminates a web of social beliefs about how men and women relate to one another and how society should function, which provides legitimacy for its domination. Marx's treatment of ideology, as found in *The German Ideology*, is part of his critique of Hegelian idealism. Whereas Hegel believed that ideas were manifestations of the spirit, Marx believed that ideas or consciousness cannot have a life independent of practical activity; they are generated by and embedded in human activity or praxis like other social relations. This premise, indicated in [figure 5.1](#) as solid lines, is the meaning of the statement "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life."⁵⁶ In this sense, the social circumstances in which productive labor occurs both condition the perception of the society in which people live and form the *practical consciousness* of human beings.

Marx and Engels caution that ideologies are a distortion and have the effect of inverting human perceptions of social reality: "In all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as a *camera obscura*."⁵⁷ The claim here is that ideas are like badly prescribed lenses; while allowing a person to view material conditions, they distort or obscure social reality. As an example, Marx and Engels posit that the liberal ideology of the French and American revolutionaries, proclaiming the rights of man and equality, cannot be taken at face value and that political and legal freedoms are not eternal truths about humanity. Thus, the bourgeois ideology could only be understood with respect to the social relations of production in which it was embedded, that is, the pressing need of the bourgeoisie to end feudal controls and for unfettered competition in economic life.

Marx's treatment of ideology also emphasizes that ideas do not evolve in a social vacuum; they do so as part of the consciousness of

human beings located in a particular mode of life, and, historically, they are propagated to serve a given class. In this way, Marx's theorem focuses on the connection between human consciousness, or thought, and praxis, or labor. In all class societies, the purpose of the creation and dissemination of ideas is to justify the rule of the dominant class over another class. In the words of Marx and Engels, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force in society is, at the same time, its ruling *intellectual* force."⁵⁸ The class that controls the means of production also controls the means of ideological production and the dissemination of ideas. For example, the bourgeois economic theory of free trade is the principal ideology scaffolding capitalist globalization.

Marx's generalization that the dominant ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the dominant class arguably accounts for subordinate classes not recognizing their capacity to change society because of ideologies that obscure injustice and inequality, but which fallaciously appear to be natural. Marx definitely did not use the term *false consciousness*, a term used to explain the proletariat's general lack of interest in social revolution, but he may have implied it.⁵⁹ Although some Marxist thinkers interpret Marx's conception of history as *closed*, whereby ideas are of secondary importance in the understanding of social change, others have convincingly reconstituted Marx's theory as an *open* theoretical perspective – an interpretation that underscores the relative autonomy of social factors and the role of human consciousness in the shaping of history.⁶⁰ Marx's theory of ideology is complex and controversial, but it allows sociologists to explore the nexus among economics and culture and ideas.

CRITICISM

Marx's general theory provokes a cacophony of criticisms, raising issues that are complex and not easily settled.⁶¹ The first critique relates to Marx's materialist account of human nature, which is predicated on a universal human being engaged in "creative" labor. Marx's ideal has been criticized both for being too materialistic and for being utopian.⁶² Under communism, labor is free of alienation, Marx declares; "it [is]

possible for me ... to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, ... criticize after dinner.”⁶³ The question of who would collect the garbage or clean the toilets was neither asked nor answered. Critics rightly point to the adoption of a dehumanizing division of labor, embodied as Taylorism, in the failed Soviet Union and the Republic of China.⁶⁴

Critics accuse Marx of *historical* determinism, of conceptualizing history as being causally determined by factors entirely outside human control. There is certainly evidence of this, for example, when Marx discusses class antagonism, he refers to “*natural* laws of capitalist production ... working with iron necessity towards *inevitable* results.”⁶⁵ Some of the most trenchant criticism of Marx’s historical theory has concentrated on its first premise, that the level of development of the productive forces will determine the nature of its social form.

Critics also accuse Marx of *technological* determinism, a reductionist approach that overplays the influence of technology on society and underplays the influence of institutional mediation and agency. Again, there is textual evidence that supports this view: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam-mill gives you society with the industrial capitalist.”⁶⁶ However, others argue that this interpretation ignores his more thoughtful treatment of technology in *Capital I*. Marx writes: “Relics of bygone instruments of labour possess the same importance for the investigation of extinct economic forms of society, as do fossil bones for the determination of extinct species of animals.... [T]hey are also indicators of the social conditions under which that labour is carried on.”⁶⁷ Here Marx understands that technology on its own – like a fossil excavated by archaeologists – allows only limited inferences to be made about the nature of society: it is not determinative. The essence of Marx’s dialectic thesis is the unity of the subjective and objective factors that are present throughout human history⁶⁸ – “Men make their own history.”⁶⁹ Moreover, the view that social change is contingent on technology not only contradicts everyday experience but also is profoundly at variance with one of Marx’s principal aims – to educate and politicize the proletariat.

Insofar as Marx’s analysis of capitalist society is a theory of exploitation and oppression, critics agree there is a lacuna concerning gender and race. Marx’s analysis of productive labor neglects how gender relations

are socially constructed. It is not that Marx and Engel disregard non-class forms of inequality, such as gender. On the contrary, Engels developed a theory of the family. The problem is rather, as feminists have argued, that Marx and Engels tended to hold gendered assumptions about women's and men's paid and unpaid work, and care for children. They present gender relations in class societies as "dominated by" and secondary to property relations.⁷⁰ Feminists argue that women's exploitation is a symptom of capitalism. In this view, the family and the gendering of paid labor and *unpaid* domestic labor are fundamentally shaped by the needs of the new capitalist paradigm, and the family is the site of women's oppression.⁷¹

A further criticism is that Marx neglected the role of slavery. Although he found slavery abhorrent – "The slave only works swayed by fear"⁷² – critics rightly argue that he ignored the racial character of capitalism and how racial exploitation was legitimized by cultural ideologies. In *Capital*, slavery is seen as the residue of a precapitalist mode of production – a view that disqualified slaves from revolutionary agency in the era of modernity.⁷³ Thus sexual and racial oppression and exploitation need to be added to the dynamic of class exploitation.⁷⁴

Marx's theory on class formation – classes transitioning from a "class-in-itself" to a "class-for-itself" – is another part of his work that has come under intense scrutiny and critique. One body of critique argues that Marx had inadequately theorized the social mechanisms that govern the transition whereby class interests coagulate as class political agency. The context for this intellectual reassessment was large swathes of the working classes voting for the conservative policies on offer from Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain in the 1980s. Marx's logic is that workers' class position generated a set of material interests, and, in turn, those interests would incentivize those workers' political strategy. The influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) critiqued classic Marxism. While classes might be easy to define "on paper," privileging the economic location of a theoretical class tends to minimize the role of "relationships" and the social space.⁷⁵ For material interests to serve as a motive for social action, it was argued, a class had to *perceive* and *understand* their material interests. Class interests would only become effective depending on appropriate cultural conventions, values, and how local

constellations of meaning shape perceptions of the human action. This argument in social analysis emphasizes the primacy of culture and has become known in social theory as “the culture turn.”⁷⁶

While there is no consensus on a shared definition, culture is generally understood as a social heritage of values, patterned ways of thinking, and learned behaviors, as well as physical artifacts. Culture is not a matter “of being, but of becoming,” wrote cultural theorist Stuart Hall.⁷⁷ The idea is that culture is socially constructed, and, importantly, is malleable and is constantly reproduced. In classical Marxism, the metaphor of the “base” – the “economism,” to use Bourdieu’s word – suggests it is a culture-free zone. The premise of class formation suggested that workers’ economic position and condition would impel them to revolutionary political action. But, as Patrick Joyce posits, “interests are not somehow given in the economic condition of workers but are *constructed through the agency of social identities*.”⁷⁸ Within classical Marxism, the superstructure, particularly a ruling class ideology, could enable or impede the working class from turning to revolutionary social change. The theory of the Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci, who stated that the capitalist class had achieved domination through cultural hegemony, became influential.⁷⁹

The cultural turn argument “initiated a tectonic shift in social analysis” toward the role of ideology and meaning in class formation.⁸⁰ If, it was argued, culture mediated the effect of material interests on political action, it could also filter how workers understand their economic space, position, and choices. This version of the cultural turn extended the “destabilization” effect of culture to class structure itself. The critique generated three shifts in the theorizing of class structure. First, culture undermined the assumption that class structures could be aligned with a stable set of class interests. Second, the structure itself was the *product* of culture and workers’ patterned ways of thinking, interaction, and behaviors governed by social mores and rules that they had to *learn*. And third, theorizing pivoted away from theories claiming universality. Workers inhabit diverse spaces, values, and social identities, and they do not follow a universal “script.” The three pillars of the cultural turn therefore were “locality, contingency, and meaning construction.”⁸¹ In essence, economic conditions and underlying economic interests do not automatically give rise to political action. Therefore, contrary to Marx’s theorizing, the new intellectual formulations

“effectively expel the working class from the centre of the socialist project.”⁸²

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Marx believed that the mode of production of material life is central to social life. Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid,” is an excellent summing up of Marx’s argument that material forces profoundly affect social, political, and intellectual life processes far beyond the workplace. For Marx, different social forms throughout the centuries are to be explained by a changing, complex interplay of the productive factors and the social and ideological spheres of society. Society is not a stable constellation of essential factors but a socially constituted structure with interconnected, contradictory tendencies and movements. Marx’s critical social theory posits that class-consciousness and class struggle cause change and social revolution. But radical change is not inevitable.

In the twenty-first century, when grand narratives are considered passé,⁸³ what contribution can Marx’s theory of history make to contemporary social theory? First, his theory has taught sociologists to see the current society we inhabit in historical terms. C. Wright Mills’s (1916–62) notion of the “sociological imagination” requires us to develop a historical consciousness, that is, to be aware of the connection between the patterns of our own lives and history-making.⁸⁴ Second, Marx’s ideas about alienated labor under capitalism are extraordinarily rich and remain central to the study of “gig work” in the “new economy.”⁸⁵ Recent scholarship, for example, maintains that alienation is a “live” concept for active social theorizing, which provides a multi-dimensional theorization of alienation for a complex, pluralistic world.⁸⁶ Third, class is at the heart of Marx’s concept of history. Although he and Engels did not invent the concept, what is unique about their contribution is that it links a theory of social class to the mode of production and provides an analysis of and an avenue toward the transformation of social life.

In the exalted world of academic scholarship, the culturalist critique of Marx’s theory on class formation developed when neoliberal capitalism was imposing itself around the globe. In the 2000s, as the cultural

turn thesis highlighted the importance of local contingencies and agency, peoples' lived experiences were being radically transformed by changes in the structure of global capitalism. In the Global North, there were widespread demonstrations against the inequalities of neoliberalism: the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011; the protests of Greek workers against austerity measures in 2014; the French *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) protests against austerity measures in 2018; and, in Britain, rail workers, nurses, and junior doctors striking against falling living standards during the 2022–3 “Winter of Discontent.” After the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a growing sensibility, perhaps best summed up by the title of Bernie Sanders’s book, *It’s Okay to Be Angry About Capitalism*,⁸⁷ that the enduring structural realities of capitalism that Marx analyzed guarantees that income and wealth are preponderantly captured by a tiny percentage of social elites, facilitated by the state and a clique of wealthy politicians. The “Davos effect” provides context to this argument: “The bigger the share of income the rich enjoy ... the more power they have to enact policies in their own interests – and the more they do so.”⁸⁸

Inside academia social theory was dismissive of these connections, however. But there was a growing sense that social theory had become divorced from reality. William Sewell, an influential cultural theorist, observed that during the very period when the notion of structural determinism had been cast aside, “the shape of our own social world has been fundamentally transformed by changes in the structure of world capitalism.”⁸⁹

In this political milieu, Chibber presents an argument for a renewed robust critique of capitalism.⁹⁰ The pendulum seems to be swinging away from culturalism to critical social theory. Chibber says, “capitalism does generate a conflict of interest. [And] it also motivates workers to resist their domination,” as Marx argues. However, “Marx’s error ... was that the *form* of this resistance would most likely be collective.”⁹¹ Individuals within the working classes opt for individualized forms of resistance over collective ones, not because of theories of Marx’s “false consciousness” or “cultural hegemony,” but because workers “accurately perceive the risk/cost matrix associated with collective action.”⁹² Marx’s ideas continue to provide a skeletal framework for studies of class-based inequalities. In every aspect of everyday life – pay insecurity, housing insecurity, education opportunities, health inequalities, and

even death rates – *class matters*. Indeed, the observation made before the COVID-19 pandemic – that “class has come to play a greater, not lesser role in important ways”⁹³ – has much greater significance in our current “age of inequality.”

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 How does Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid,” sum up Marx’s belief that material life is central to social life?
- 2 What is meant by alienation? Is alienation a relic of the factory system or is it relevant to contemporary society?
- 3 In terms of how Marx conceives social classes, explain the meaning of a “class-in-itself” and a “class-for-itself.” Is Marx’s theory of ideologies useful for understanding politics today?

6

Karl Marx: Economics of Capitalism

Marx's economics cannot be separated from his philosophy or sociology, particularly in that his theories are concerned with social relations, social structure, and human agency. Marx argues that the development of the “means of production,” part of the “base” on which the superstructure of social relations is built, as shown in [figure 5.1](#), is the key to understanding the social structure of society. In contrast to classical economics, Marx's theory of commodity production and value provides a fundamental critique of capitalism.¹ Consequently, Marx's economic writings are deeply textured and profoundly sociological. In 2018 Robin Varghese, a senior economist, wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “Marx's theory remains one of the most perceptive critiques of capitalism ever offered.”²

This chapter focuses on Marx's analysis of the internal logic of capitalism. Its goal is to allow the reader to engage with the original texts and to discover the complexity, the subtlety, and the deeply social nature of Marx's economics. First, we examine commodity production and Marx's notion of commodity fetishism. From this, it is a rational next step to examine Marx's development of the Ricardian labor theory of value, and – his most outstanding contribution – the theory of surplus value, which still remains a powerful critique of labor exploitation. Finally, we examine one of the most controversial areas of Marx's economics, his theories of capitalist cyclical crises.

COMMODITY PRODUCTION

Marx's economic theory ultimately aims "to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society."³ His critique of the economics of capitalism is found in various works: *Wage Labour and Capital* (1849); *Grundrisse* (1857–8), which was not published until 1953; and the three volumes of *Capital*, which constitute the centerpiece of his economic writing. As previously noted, only *Capital I* (1867) was published in his lifetime, and therefore he had no opportunity to edit the completed work, eliminate inconsistencies and repetitions, or clarify ambiguities. For Marx, a scientific economic theory is one that adopts the principle of totality, which involves an understanding of the relations of the simplest to the more complex, the part to the social whole.⁴ The principle of totality explains why Marx begins *Capital I* with an analysis of a commodity. A commodity is the most basic *part* of the society that must be related to the social *whole*, a totality. Marx's holistic methodology emphasizes the need to investigate the multiple and historically changing inner connections between productive forces and all the other non-economic facets of society.

In any society, people have to *produce* by their own labor things that satisfy their basic needs. In some form or other, they also *distribute* among one another the products of their productive labor. The individual members of the society *consume* the distributed products according to their needs. In *Capital*, Marx explains how these three activities occur in a capitalist society. For Marx, the basic element of a society is a single commodity, and its wealth is "an immense accumulation of commodities." Thus, his economic theory of the capitalist mode of production begins with an analysis of a *commodity*, defined as any "object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another."⁵ In Marx's theory the term *commoditization* refers to a fundamental feature of capitalist modernity: a highly complex, interdependent system of commodity production for the purpose of exchange through the market, as opposed to production for the direct use by the producer.

Following Adam Smith, Marx states that every commodity has a twofold aspect: its utility or *use value* and its *exchange value*. The use value of a commodity is determined by its capacity to satisfy a human

need, which cannot be quantified. Use values are specific, concrete, and ahistorical, in the sense that they exist in all societies. The exchange value of a commodity refers to the value a commodity has when offered in exchange for other commodities. The exchange has to satisfy certain properties, for example, quantity or weight. If x exchanges for y , then x is equivalent in exchange to y . For example, if a dairy farmer produces cheese, by virtue of its natural properties, part will be consumed to satisfy a need. Any surplus may be taken to a market and exchanged either by barter for another product that the farmer cannot produce (e.g., a scythe) or for money. Thus, the commodity (cheese) acquires another feature unrelated to its use value, namely exchange value. Exchange value refers to the way a quantity of one commodity, say a kilogram of cheese, can be expressed in terms of another commodity, say a scythe. Every commodity has a use value, but not every commodity has an exchange value, either because it is something freely available (e.g., air, sunshine) or it is not exchanged (e.g., something produced only for personal consumption).

Although every commodity is characterized by its particular physical or natural properties that give it its use value, the question that Marx addressed is what the determinant of a commodity's exchange value is. This had been a prime object of study by classical economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Adam Smith, in *Wealth of Nations*, postulates that value is conferred on a commodity by the act of labor. Smith explains it this way:

Every man is rich or poor according to the degree in which he can afford to enjoy the necessities, conveniences, and amusements of human life. But ... it is but a very small part of these with which a man's own labour can supply him. The far greater part of them he must derive from the labour of other people, and he must be rich or poor according to the quantity of that labour which he can command, or which he can afford to purchase. The value of any commodity, therefore, is equal to the quantity of labor which it enables him to purchase or command. Labor, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities.⁶

For both Smith and Ricardo, labor adds value to a commodity. Although Marx's most basic model of capitalist production incorporates both

Ricardo's distinction between use value and exchange value and also Smith's labor theory of value, Marx used the economic concepts to draw very different conclusions.

Marx maintains that what creates the relationship of exchange is not a physical property derived from the use value but a historically specific social one; it is the amount of labor time embodied in the commodities of production. Thus, the property that all commodities have in common – the one that creates the relationship of exchange – is that they are the product of labor. Marx next claims that labor, like a commodity, has a dual character depending on whether it produces use value or exchange value. *Concrete labor* is labor of a particular type and purpose that creates use value. *Abstract labor*, on the other hand, creates exchange value based upon the quantity of abstract labor. Under capitalism, labor is, at the same time, both concrete and abstract, and its product is both a use value and an exchange value. Marx believed that his account of the “twofold character of labor” was one of the best points in *Capital*.⁷

Marx's abstract treatment of value does not ignore the importance of demand and supply. Commodities do exchange above their value; the *social necessary labor time* to produce them considers both direct (living) labor inputs and indirect (dead) labor inputs: the social necessary labor time to produce machinery and extract raw materials, that is, the means of production. Marx, unlike orthodox economists, recognizes that demand has a class dimension: “supply and demand presuppose the existence of different classes and sections of classes which divide the total revenue of a society and consume it among themselves as revenue, and, therefore, make up the demand created by revenue.”⁸

The capitalist mode of production is characterized by the production of social use values, and the exchange of the products of concrete labor is expressed, in exchange, as abstract social necessary labor. If value were determined by actual abstract labor time, it would mean that a commodity produced by a slow and incompetent worker would produce a more valuable commodity than an identical one produced in less time by a conscientious worker. This problem is avoided because of the concept of social necessary labor time, which means the average amount of time and level of skill and effort required for the production of the commodity in a particular industry.

Marx's labor theory of value embodies a social relationship that can be theoretically quantified by calculating the exchange value of

a commodity in relation to the total amount of labor time expended to produce the commodity. What characterizes the capitalist mode of production is not just the exchange of commodities but the buying and selling of the worker's capacity to work, which Marx called labor power. For Marx, it is only historic abstract labor power that defines capitalism: "On the one hand all labor is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labor-power, and ... it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, ... human labor-power [has] ... a definite aim, ... it produces use-values."⁹ Under capitalism, labor power becomes a commodity – the buyer is the capitalist; the seller is the worker. The price of labor power is the wage. As a commodity, labor power must have a use value: therefore, it is the creator of use values in the form of commodities and, as such, embodies abstract labor. In this process, labor power is unique as a commodity because its use value creates specific values in commodity form, and, hence, it is the creator of value for the capitalist.

Marx's labor theory of value not only explains commodity production but also embodies a class structure specific to capitalism. As Vivek Chibber points out, capitalism has one essential social division – "the one between those who control society's productive assets and those who have none."¹⁰ The social exchange of labor power is predicated upon the private ownership of the productive assets, on the one hand, and the existence of an asset-poor and landless class of workers selling their labor power, on the other.

CAPITALIST EXCHANGE PROCESS

Having established that a commodity has a twofold nature – its use value and exchange value – and that the exchange value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labor time necessary for the production of a commodity, Marx provides a lengthy account of the genesis of money in the exchange process and of how money becomes capital. Exchange relationships between commodities predate capitalism, which develops when labor power itself becomes a commodity and money is introduced into the exchange process. Money is the most abstract of commodities. It is a means of payment, a unit of account, and a store of wealth. As a means of payment, it avoids simple bartering and mediates the process of exchange by creating a set of equivalencies among

intrinsically different physical commodities (e.g., food, sweatshirts, and fuel) and labor power.

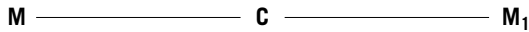
Typically, under capitalism, simple commodity exchange starts with an individual who owns some commodity (e.g., one ton of corn) that needs to be exchanged for another. First, the commodity must be exchanged for money. Marx expressed this step by $C-M$, where C denotes commodity and M is money. Second, the money received is exchanged for the needed commodity (e.g., fertilizer), expressed as $M-C$. In order to purchase other commodities, certain commodities are sold for money, which is essentially a use value. This simple exchange process is represented by $C-M-C$, the circulation of commodities, and is shown in [figure 6.1](#).



Figure 6.1. Simple commodity exchange: selling in order to buy

In simple commodity exchange, C denotes the two extremes of the circulation because each is in commodity form and each has the same value; however, they are *not* the same commodity. This simple commodity exchange can also illustrate the sale of the commodity of labor power, which is the wage laborer's only means for the consumption of goods and services. In this case, labor power (C) is exchanged for wages (M) and eventually for wage commodities (C).

Marx had to show how it is possible for the capitalist to make a profit and accumulate capital. A capitalist starts not with labor power but with money. Using money, the capitalist purchases particular types of commodities, raw materials, machinery, and tools – the means of production – and, of course, labor power. A prerequisite for capitalist production is the willingness of workers to exercise their “freedom” of exchange and sell their labor power to the capitalist. Whereas Smith and Ricardo characterize this process as two equal parties pursuing their individual interests, Marx argues that the exchange is fundamentally asymmetrical because the capitalist owns the means of production and labor power is the only commodity that asset-poor workers are able to sell. The capitalist organizes the productive forces and sells the resulting commodities, or outputs, for money. The capitalist's exchange process is represented by $M-C-M_1$, the general formula for capital shown in [figure 6.2](#).



**Figure 6.2. The capitalist exchange paradigm:
buying in order to sell higher**

In contrast to simple commodity exchange, the M–C–M₁ circulation begins and ends with money, not commodities. The two extremes (M) are the same (money), but they are *not* of the same value. The industrial capitalist's motive of exchange is to expand value; so the money received at the end of the cycle (M₁) is greater than the money advanced at the start (M). Money used to generate more money (profit) is called *capital*, hence capitalism. The aim of the “circuit of capital” is to act as self-expanding value, that is, profit in the form of money.

COMMODITY FETISHISM

Marx's theory of value calls attention to the social division of labor and the relationships of interdependence underlying commodity production, which are obscured by what he called fetishistic or reified commodities. “A commodity *appears* ... a very trivial thing ... it is, in reality, a very queer thing,” writes Marx.¹¹ Here, Marx juxtaposes commodity production alongside a world of social illusion, a world in which value is thought to exist essentially in commodities – inanimate objects – instead of being added through labor. Consumers mistakenly believe that the lifeless commodity, such as an iPhone or a pair of Armani sneakers, has social status, while those who produce it are perceived as commodities and are treated as inanimate things.

Marx's notion of commodity fetishism is rooted in his account of alienation in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Under precapitalist modes of production, in the imagination of people, inanimate objects acquire superhuman qualities and become a fetish. Paralleling his critique of religion, Marx writes that capital appears as an object (money) while social relations take on an illusory or fetish form. Whereas in primitive social forms God is the human's own creation, in capitalist modernity people also create market relationships between commodities, concealing exploitative social relations, and this is justified by the doctrine of freedom of exchange. The link between



Photo 6.1. Marx identifies positive aspects of technical innovation. New technology, such as the robotic arm, *potentially* frees workers from dehumanizing labor and offers the opportunity for men and women to engage in creative labor, in which they exercise their unique human capacities.

Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and his critique of religious consciousness is made explicit in *Capital*:

There is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In ... the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world ... the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.¹²

Commodity fetishism describes the tendency for consumers and capitalists alike to display excessive devotion toward material “things,” to believe that things have an independent existence and are endowed

with extraordinary powers. Indeed, the premise of commodity fetishism is that relations between people have been substituted for relations between things. By being granted independence as a commodity, in the sense that it becomes endowed with the powers of human beings, things appear to exert control, so what happens to people seems to depend upon the movement of markets and not on the social relations of production characteristic to capitalism. For example, after the credit market meltdown began in 2007, the loss of a person's home was typically blamed on an objective, natural thing – the credit market – rather than on the deranged logic of market fundamentalism and the imperative of maximizing shareholder value.

Over the last four decades, the effects of neoliberal globalization have resulted in the scope of private enterprise expanding exponentially compared to the years 1945 and 1975, and with it there has been an increase in commodification. In the core capitalist countries, neoliberal policies of privatization of state-owned assets, such as energy, water, housing, and health, have had the effect of increasing the number of commodities acquiring an exchange value. Again, as noted by Chibber, “goods and services that had been distributed as citizenship *rights* were fenced off and turned into commodities.”¹³ Of course, the flip side of this was that asset-poor workers became ever more dependent on selling their labor power for their economic welfare. These global events can only be understood in relation to the needs of capital, which we turn to next.

THEORY OF SURPLUS VALUE AND EXPLOITATION

So far, we have focused on Marx's economic analysis of the capitalist system of commodity production. To understand the development of a capitalist society, to expose Marx's “economic law of motion,” and to appreciate his major contribution to modern sociology, we have to examine the process of extracting a surplus from labor power. This is Marx's second “great law”: the theory of surplus value. It is the social theory of capitalist production. Importantly, this is the theory that explains the forces that propel the development of capitalism.

In [figure 6.2](#), M_1 has a greater value than M . This means that, in the movement $C \rightarrow M_1$, extra value has been created. Marx called this extra value *surplus value*, the difference between the values of inputs and

outputs. That productive labor creates surplus value is not controversial; what is contentious, however, is the premise behind Marx's theory that the source of profit on capital comes from the exploitation of labor. The thesis that capital exploits labor stems from a presupposition of the labor theory of value – namely, that labor power is the only commodity that produces surplus value. Marx's theory of surplus value explains the long-term future of capitalism. Marx foresaw a relative decline in workers' standard of living, the need for capitalists to transform the production process continually, and the tendency for capitalism as a whole to experience periodic crises.

Marx's theory of surplus value makes distinctions between *constant capital* and *variable capital* and between *necessary labor* and *surplus labor*, and it describes methods to increase surplus value. Constant capital refers to the part of capital that constitutes the means of production and does not, in the process of production, undergo any quantitative change of value. Variable capital, on the other hand, is "that part of capital, represented by labor power, [which] does, in the process of production, undergo an alteration of value. It both reproduces the equivalent of its own value, and it produces an excess, a surplus value, which may itself vary, may be more or less according to the circumstances."¹⁴ The value of labor power is the cost of its purchase, which is the labor time necessary to produce a "real wage," a subsistence basket of commodities (food, shelter, clothing) necessary for its maintenance. The value labor power creates in production is the quantity of labor time exercised in return for that wage.

Under capitalism, the contribution made by labor power to the value of output exceeds its cost. In *Wage Labour and Capital*, Marx writes, "The worker receives means of subsistence in exchange for his labor power, but the capitalist receives ... the creative power whereby the worker not only replaces what he consumes but *gives to the accumulated labor a greater value than it previously possessed*.... [I]t is just this noble reproductive power that the worker surrenders to the capitalist in exchange for the means of subsistence received."¹⁵ The economic system compels the worker to work longer than is sufficient to embody in the product the value of his or her labor power. The rate of surplus value can be quantified by dividing the working day of the wage laborer; it falls into two parts: socially necessary labor time and surplus labor time, as in [figure 6.3](#).

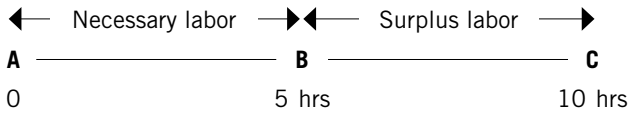


Figure 6.3. The rate of surplus value

In figure 6.3, the line A to C represents a working day of ten hours. Suppose a worker works a ten-hour day and that the socially necessary labor time to produce her wage is five hours. During the first five hours of the working day (A to B), the worker produces a value equivalent to the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the reproduction of her labor power. This is what Marx calls “necessary labor time,” and the work spent during this time is *necessary labor*. The necessary labor time will vary considerably in different industries depending on the level of technology, the degree of human skill, and the cost of raw materials. The work undertaken during the second part of the working day, the line B to C, brings no advantage to the worker, and she works for “free” for the capitalist. As Marx explains, “During the second period of the labour process ... the workman ... creates no value for himself. He creates surplus value which, for the capitalist, has all the charms of a creation out of nothing.”¹⁶ Marx calls this productive labor in the second period of the working day “surplus labour time,” and the value produced in the second five hours is *surplus value*, which is appropriated by the capitalist.

For Marx, the appropriation of surplus value is the basis of profit, once other fixed and variable costs (e.g., rent, raw materials) have been deducted. The rate of surplus value, defined as the ratio of surplus labor time to the necessary labor time, is $5/5$, in this example, which equals 1 or 100 percent. This rate can be explained as follows:

$$\text{Rate of surplus value} = \frac{s}{v} \frac{\text{surplus labor time}}{\text{necessary labor time}} = \frac{5}{5} = 100\%$$

The rate of surplus value measures the degree of exploitation: “The rate of surplus value is therefore an exact expression for the degree of exploitation of labour power by capital, or of the laborer by the capitalist.”¹⁷ The rate of exploitation is $e = s / v$, where v , the necessary

labor time, is called variable capital because it varies during the production, contributing more value to output than it costs as an output. For Marx, it is only under capitalism that exploitation in production is veiled by the ideology of freedom of exchange. The surplus value ratio, like capital itself, embodies a class relation and a form of domination. The accumulation of surplus value depends directly on the total amount of labor the capitalist employs and on the rate of exploitation. Again, from Marx: “capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”¹⁸

As a system, capitalism imposes an imperative objective on capitalists or its agents (managers): it must be operated for the purpose of valorization or profit maximizing. The rate of surplus value can be increased by extending the length of the working day. Consider, for example, the situation represented in [figure 6.3](#). If the capitalist extends the working day by two hours, from ten to twelve hours, that would extend the B–C portion of the line A–C by two hours, which would represent an increase in the rate of surplus value: e is $\frac{7}{5}$ or 140 percent. The surplus value produced by lengthening the working day, Marx termed *absolute surplus value*. However, physiological and (possibly) legal restrictions limit the capitalist’s ability to increase absolute surplus value by lengthening working time.

The dynamic nature of capitalism itself generates the production of *relative* surplus value as the dominant method of increasing the rate of exploitation (or e). New technology, by cheapening labor costs, can reduce the time needed to produce commodities, in other words, the necessary labor time (or v). If, for example, machinery reduces the necessary labor time from five to four hours each day, e would be $\frac{6}{4}$ or 150 percent. In [figure 6.3](#), the line A to B would be shortened, so more of the worker’s total time (A–C) would produce surplus value. The surplus value produced by the reduction of the necessary labor time, Marx termed *relative surplus value*. To increase the “productiveness of labor,” Marx predicts that modes of production must be revolutionized. He writes, “When surplus value has to be produced by the conversion of necessary labour into surplus labour, it by no means suffices for capital ... simply to prolong the duration of that process. The technical and social conditions of the process ... must be revolutionized before the productiveness of labour can be increased.”¹⁹

In Part 4 of *Capital I*, Marx details the many strategies for increasing relative surplus value. His analysis foreshadows the genesis of management in modern society. The first strategy to increase relative surplus value is through finer division of labor, which has the effect of giving the capitalist “undisputed authority” over the workers.²⁰ The second strategy to increase relative surplus value “beyond all bounds set by human nature”²¹ is through investment in technology. Examples of technology to increase relative surplus value include assembly lines, robotics, and artificial intelligence tools used in “platform-mediated” work.²² Other technical means also embrace “gamification,” which, according to Abhishek Behl et al., adds “game” techniques into the workplace to increase relative surplus value or, to give it its modern parlance, labor productivity.²³

When controlled by capitalists, technology cheapens commodities by increasing the pace of work and exponentially reducing the value of necessary labor time. Marx writes that technology causes “a more intensified labor”²⁴ and “endless drudgery,” and molds workers’ behavior into “a barrack disciple.” Concomitantly, maximizing control over workers is derived from the fact that the wage-labor exchange secures only a *potential* labor power for the production of surplus value. The new technology has a dual effect – it is labor saving, but less obvious, it substitutes one type of worker for another, the skilled for the unskilled, while generating demand for new occupations and skills. This tendency is ever-present today. Kristen Senz, for example, writes about how the latest learning-based AI technologies, such as ChatGPT, fueled by technological determinism, seem to have rekindled fears about AI replacing workers *en masse*.²⁵ This propensity is a direct and unavoidable result of the internal logic of capitalism to maximize relative surplus value. Marx predicted a permanent pool of unemployed workers, the “industrial reserve army” of labor, which would have the designed effect of enhancing the power of commodity producers and downward adjustments in wage rates.

It is a misinterpretation of *Capital I*, however, to assume that Marx’s analysis of technology was totally negative. Marx identifies positive aspects of technical innovation: “Modern Industry, indeed, compels society, under penalty of death, to replace the detailed-worker of today, crippled by life-long repetition of one and the same trivial operation ... by the fully developed individual.”²⁶ That technical change can unleash

workers from debilitating and boring work speaks to Marx's argument that technology *potentially* frees men and women from dehumanizing labor and offers the opportunity for labor to correspond to human essence.

Although new technology has the potential to enhance the human condition, Marx's economic thesis predicts dire living conditions for the working class:

To say that the worker has an interest in the rapid growth of capital is only to say that the more rapidly the worker increases the wealth of others, the richer will be the crumbs that fall to him, the greater is the number of workers that can be employed and called into existence, the more can the mass of slaves dependent on capital be increased. We have thus seen that: Even the *most favorable situation* for the working class, *the most rapid possible growth of capital*, however much it may improve the material existence of the worker, does not remove the antagonism between his interests and the interests of the bourgeoisie, the interests of the capitalists. *Profit and wages* remain as before in *inverse proportion*. If capital is growing rapidly, wages may rise; the profit of capital rises incomparably more rapidly.²⁷

Marx's analysis speaks to the vulnerability of wage labor to capital. The capitalist class structure, even in the most favorable economic conditions, is one of contradiction. The capitalist has an interest in intensifying work and minimizing labor costs to maximize relative surplus value. This aim to maximize profit has far-reaching effects, and Marx investigates these as well. Whereas *Capital I* examines the production of surplus value inside the factory, in *Capital II* and *III*, Marx explores a whole series of capitalist phenomena occurring at a macro level, including economic crises.

THEORIES OF CRISES

Capitalists' impulse to maximize relative surplus value makes capitalism highly dynamic but unstable. The process generates three tendencies that are central to capitalist development: the accumulation of capital

in fewer hands; finer and more complex divisions of labor; and the creation of global markets as capital seeks new markets and cheaper labor. A central objective of Marx's economic theory is to demonstrate that, although capitalism was historically the most efficient mode of production, it was prone to chronic economic crises. In essence, Marx postulates that crises are inevitable for two reasons: insufficient demand and the falling rate of profit.

Inherent in Marx's theory of relative surplus value is a fundamental contradiction between production and consumption: on the one hand, the capitalist class is driven by the urge for wealth to increase the production of surplus value, which increases the supply of commodities that must be converted into money; on the other hand, accumulation is based on the fact that consumption by the producers of surplus value – the exploited workers – is restricted to basic necessities. In any society other than capitalism, the overproduction of commodities would be a celebration; extra commodities would mean increased individual consumption. However, for capitalism, private consumption is necessary, but not sufficient; consumption must realize a profit. In *Capital II*, Marx points to insufficient demand or underconsumption as a causal mechanism for economic crisis: one unsold “stream of commodities” entering the market causes commodity producers to compete with one another and to sell at lower prices. Thus, a crisis breaks out when insufficient consumption causes the supply of commodities to exceed consumer demand.²⁸ For example, when unsold automobiles build up on dealers' car lots, autoworkers are laid off, and the economy enters a crisis until the unsold automobiles are purchased and the automobile manufacturer restarts production. However, the economy is a network of capitals that are intimately integrated with other circuits of capital. As consumption of automobiles falls, it triggers a decrease in investment for automobile machinery, which, in turn, causes a crisis among capitals producing the machines that build automobiles. It is this interconnected system of unplanned “commodity capital” (e.g., automobile manufacturers) and “productive capital” (e.g., robot manufacturers supplying the automobile industry) that led Marx to refer to the anarchy of capitalist production. Economic crises break out extremely often, given the anarchy of capitalist production, fluctuations in market prices, the vagaries of the credit system (e.g., the 2008 collapse of the US housing market due to subprime mortgages), and technological change.

In *Capital III*, Marx synthesizes his analysis of the production of surplus value and the realization of profit into his contentious “law” – the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Although classical economists believed that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall was a natural fact, Marx’s treatment of the phenomenon was situated in the capitalist social relations of production. A theoretical demonstration of the falling rate of profit can be given mathematically, but Marx articulates this situation in a sociologically more interesting way as follows:

Since the mass of the employed living labor is continually on the decline ... it follows that the portion of living labor, unpaid and congealed in surplus value, must also be continually on the decrease compared to the amount of value represented by the invested total capital. Since the ratio of the mass of surplus value to the value of the invested total capital forms the rate of profit, this rate must constantly fall.²⁹

Marx’s argument is that there are enduring structural facts about the capitalist economy that create periodic crises. As more productive capital (machinery) is introduced into the production of surplus value, less necessary labor time is needed to produce the same quantity of commodities. As a result, the costs of “constant capital” (c) increase relative to the “variable capital” (v). Following Marx, the rate of profit (r) is defined as the ratio of surplus value (s) to the total capital employed [$c + v$]: $r = s / [c + v]$. In words, since the cost of total capital employed is increasing in relation to the rate of exploitation, the rate of profit must inevitably fall. The “breakdowns” between capitals, and a general tendency for the rate of profit to fall, account for economic booms and recessions, which characterize the capitalist business cycle.

For Marx, crises stem from the fundamental contradiction of capitalist production and consumption – from unrestrained production without regard to corresponding levels of consumption. Marx writes,

The *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*.... The means – unconditional development of the productive forces of society – comes continually into conflict with ... existing capital. The capitalist mode of production is, for this reason, a historical means of developing the material forces of production and creating

an appropriate world-market and is, at the same time, a continual conflict between this its historic task and its own corresponding relations of social production.³⁰

Marx's conception of these crises is not simply an economic concept that goes along with the theory of value; it is a sociological theory, the center of which is a particular mode of productive forces and hierarchical class relations. Crises occur because the anarchic nature of the capitalist mode of production is the social outcome of capitalists' individual decisions; and a falling rate of profit is a social outcome that makes such economic decisions inevitable.³¹ Marx believed that crises were endemic to capitalism, but nowhere in his writings does he predict an inevitable apocalyptic economic collapse. Crises do function as a force to eliminate overcapacity, but, for Marx, the instability built into the system would eventuate in fostering revolutionary consciousness and collective action.

CRITICISM

Critics of Marx's economic theories have been numerous and prolific, but space permits only a brief consideration of some of the major criticisms that have the most direct bearing on the themes covered in this chapter. One set of criticisms relates to his theory of value. The first criticism is its inutility for the rational allocation of commodities and scarce resources in an economy. Marx's proposition that labor is the source of all value is "useless at best, harmful and misleading at its not infrequent worst."³² Moreover, the limitation of the theory of value, critics argue, is glaringly apparent because it ignores the key factor of relative scarcity, which is central to determining equilibrium prices in markets and the equilibrium rate of profit. There is textual evidence that explicitly repudiates this critique. Marx's theory of value is a model of commodity production; it is "*not* meant as a general theory of relative prices."³³

The second major criticism is of Marx's doctrine of the "progressive pauperization" of the proletariat. Marx forecast periodic economic crises, colossal quasi-monopolistic corporations, and mass unemployment resulting from technological change. In this scenario, the working class would experience increasing misery as living standards underwent decline over time. The received economic wisdom is that the ownership

by the working classes of the ubiquitous automobile, satellite dish, smart TV, and other luxury products has proven Marx wrong. In retrospect, it is easy to see why his forecast has long since appeared incorrect: Marx underestimated the stabilizing effects of liberal democracy.

In the twentieth century, Western capitalist societies, responding to working-class political pressure and social movements, redistributed income through progressive income tax and introduced universal education and health coverage, now regarded as basic to postmodern liberal democracies. Marx did not anticipate “varieties of capitalism”³⁴ with policies that reflect local realities, local cultures, and, ironically, the political clout of local social movements. The idea of diversity is illustrated by contrasting the capitalism practiced in the Nordic states of Europe – for example in Norway, Sweden, and Finland – with the more *laissez-faire* capitalism of Britain and the United States.

Marx’s economic theory, arguably, did not adequately consider the growth of political democracy in the Western world, but it is also important to understand that the orthodox economic critique is based on a misreading of Marx’s *Capital*.³⁵ Consider this statement: “Pauperism forms a condition of capitalist production, and the capitalist development of wealth. It enters into the *faux frais*³⁶ of capitalist production; but capital knows how to throw these from its own shoulders on to those of the working class and the lower middle class.”³⁷ Here, Marx is referring not to the impoverishment of the entire proletariat but to the impoverishment of the “lowest sediment”: the underclass of the unemployed, the widows, the addicts, the sick that capital is unwilling to pay for directly. The years from 1945 to 1979 constituted a brief period when most Western governments gave avid support for publicly funded education and training, infrastructure, health care, and pensions – security from the “cradle to the grave.” It was also a time when most governments met the incidental operational costs of capitalism and, increasingly, pollution management – costs that capital is all too happy to pass on to the working and middle classes.

Periodically, for the capitalist system to work, the state (that is, the taxpayer) has to intervene directly in the economy. This was demonstrated plainly in 2008 when the British government rescued the financial institution Northern Rock, and the US administration intervened to save mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. As *The Economist* acknowledged, “The unpalatable truth is that by the time a financial

crisis hits, the state often has to ... shoulder a large part of the losses.”³⁸ In times of relative economic stability, neoliberal ideology propagates the myth that the economy and society are two separate realms in order to allow unfettered capital accumulation. It is at this time that we are likely to hear that business must always be “unshackled from ‘wealth-destroying’ regulation.”³⁹ In times of crisis, the myth of separation is easier to expose. The logic of the “self-regulating” market, whether applied to banking or other sectors of the economy, always needs the social superstructure, which is why the language of “too big to fail” simply means “so big that it can depend on society to pick it up when it topples.”⁴⁰ That capital’s profits are privatized but risks and losses are socialized would not have surprised Marx in the least.

A third major criticism relates to Marx’s theories of capitalist crises. Marx’s dialectical method commits him to foretell that certain social changes are historically inevitable. Much of his economic theory is an exposition of the mechanism that “inevitably” brings about economic crises. His model on the tendency for the rate of profit to fall has received much criticism. Critics have pointed out, for example, that if, as Marx contends, the rate of profit falls because of investment in productive forces, then, presumably, the decline should be avoided when capitalists disinvest or when stagnation in technical innovation sets in.⁴¹

Furthermore, Marx neglects that those capitalists experiencing a fall in the rate of profit might adopt a business strategy that generates countertendencies to offset it partly or completely, for example, by pivoting toward financialized capitalism – defined as the increasing role of financial motives in business and everyday life. As Bob Wylie puts it, financialization means “Money goes to more money, and there’s no real wealth created.”⁴² In the 1990s, many academics argued that Marx’s model was totally discredited by capitalism’s “self-stabilizing” economic forces. Again, as Wylie points out, “The Crash of 2008 put paid to that argument.”⁴³

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The two main pillars of Marx’s analysis of capitalism are the labor theory of value and the theory of crises. Marx’s labor theory of value embodies a social theory of commodity production, which makes *Capital* “unrivalled” as a work of sociological theory.⁴⁴ The theory

characterizes capitalism as a fundamentally exploitative system or “an act of robbery.”⁴⁵ “The work of Marx taken as a whole,” writes C. Wright Mills, “is a savage, sustained indictment of one alleged injustice: that the profit, the comfort, the luxury of one man is paid for by the loss, the misery, the denial of another.”⁴⁶ The central object of Marx’s theory of crises was to demonstrate that the “anarchic” capitalist system was prone to periodic economic upheavals. Nowhere in his writings does Marx predict an inevitable apocalyptic economic collapse.

The reiteration of the familiar theme that Marx’s alleged “predictions” have been falsified does not mean that some of Marx’s economic theses are not irrelevant today. His theories do contain omissions and underestimate the chameleon nature of capitalism, but we need to balance criticisms of them with their not inconsiderable achievements. One achievement of Marx’s *Capital* is its pioneering contribution to the sociological analysis of technological change. Marx’s work underpins early labor process theory, which seeks to reveal the social and class interests behind technological change. Such a perspective informed research on employers’ strategies to de-skill workers through the application of microcomputer-based technology in the 1980s.⁴⁷ Marx’s analysis also centers attention on contemporary strategies to extract surplus value by the use of algorithmic technologies to monitor workers inside the workplace and in their homes. Shoshana Zuboff, for example, opines, “surveillance capitalism repeats capitalism’s ‘original sin’ of primitive accumulation.”⁴⁸

Another achievement of Marx’s economic tome is its pioneering contribution to the twenty-first-century debate on the climate emergency and ecological destruction. By the 1860s, the depletion of soil fertility was a major environmental concern in Europe. Marx provided a systematic critique of large-scale capitalist agriculture, centering on how soil fertility is modified by capitalism’s historical mission of expansion and accumulation. In *Capital I*, Marx is eloquent on the trade-offs between capitalist economics and land ecology:

[A]ll progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility.... Capitalist production, therefore, develops ... only by sapping the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the labourer.⁴⁹

In this passage, Marx's central theory is that of a "metabolic rift" or contradiction between the natural environment and human agency, a rift caused by the intensive exploitation of the soil through the use of fertilizer. Today's critical social theorists argue that Marx's excoriating critique of capitalism's historical *raison d'être* of expansion and accumulation, as well as its peculiar mode of relating to the world in ways "hostile" to resonant experiences, foresaw the climate crisis embedded in capitalism.⁵⁰ US Senator Bernie Sanders expresses a similar point of view: "the greed of the ruling class today is not only destructive to the lives of ordinary people, but it also threatens the literal survival of the planet."⁵¹ Marx's social theory captures the essence of sustainable development; in terms of the classical tradition, it provides important theoretical foundations for environmental sociology,⁵² and it informs the present moment on the excessive depletion of nonrenewable resources required to drive AI technologies.⁵³

A further major accomplishment of Marx's economics is its correct prediction of the dominance of large corporations, the entrenched power of corporate elites, and rising inequality. For Marx, the logical tendency of capitalism is the concentration of capital. Marx's economics built some of the scaffolding for twentieth-century debates on monopoly economic power – the power to control markets, to destroy small and medium-sized competitors, and to dictate contracts with smaller producers that supply the conglomerate. As Joel Bakan's *The Corporation* persuasively argues, an aggregate of capital is a "pathological institution" that relentlessly pursues, without exception, "its own self-interest, regardless of the often-harmful consequences it might cause to others."⁵⁴ In the twenty-first century, global capitalism has concentrated an astounding degree of economic power in the hands of just a few mega-technology corporations, unimaginable even twenty-five years ago. We draw attention to Pepper D. Culpepper and Kathleen Thelen's work on corporate power. They argue that radical technologies have created radically different monopolists than in the past: a few titans – Apple, Google, Meta, and Microsoft – who wield immense power, what they call "platform power."⁵⁵

Marx's economic theory is that capitalism brought massive inequalities of income and wealth. We examine the injustices of neoliberal global capitalism in [chapter 17](#). In this age of neoliberalism, the United States, Britain, and Canada have become extremely unequal, with virtually all

the income growth going to the top 1 percent since 2008.⁵⁶ Today, the issues of precarious work, zero-hour contracts, in-work poverty, and extreme income inequality are part of a public consciousness regarding the deleterious effects of globalization, but that we can find these ideas in Marx's *magnum opus* indicates what a remarkable achievement these works were in their time. Importantly, so much of human activity today is "perceived principally through the prism of economics,"⁵⁷ but this would come as no surprise to those familiar with Marx's economic writings. For these reasons, we still concur with Francis Wheen that as long as capitalism endures, *Capital* will never lose its resonance, or its power to bring the world into a new and sharper focus.⁵⁸

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 What is your understanding of the term "commodity fetishism"? What examples of commodity fetishism do you see in contemporary capitalist societies?
- 2 What is meant by *absolute surplus value* and *relative surplus value*? Are these concepts relevant in explaining the effects of AI-enabled technology?
- 3 In *Capital*, Marx argues there is a contradiction between the natural environment and human agency. Do you think Marx's economic theory explains the current climate crisis?

7

Émile Durkheim: Division of Labor

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Émile Durkheim gives an analysis of the evolution of society from small-scale societies with little division of labor to complex, industrial, urban societies in which he identifies a breakdown in shared norms and values. The book is also a work of theory in which he explores the relationship between the individual and society and in which he argues that even the idea of individualism depends upon changes in the social structure. The moral and political problems that emerged from the evolution of large, complex societies included questions of how to reconcile individual freedom and social order and how to find forms of social organization that would produce both social solidarity and individual freedom. In discussing the idea of social solidarity, Durkheim variously refers to the ties, or social links, that bind the individual to the group and ensure social cohesion. He also refers to these ties as “social cement” because of attachments between individuals that could have an intense emotional hold over them.¹

Durkheim is widely regarded as the founder of the French school of sociology. This chapter examines the intellectual influences that shaped his conception of sociology and his analysis of society. It then proceeds to discuss a central concern in Durkheim’s first book: the relationship between the individual and social solidarity. We begin with a short biography.

LIFE AND WORKS

David Émile Durkheim was born in 1858 at Épinal, the regional capital of the Vosges in France. His father was the chief rabbi in the region, but while still a schoolboy, Durkheim decided against following his father into the rabbinate. He was a clever pupil and obtained two baccalaureates, one in letters in 1874 and one in sciences in 1875. He spent three years preparing for entry to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. During this period, he turned to the study of morality, society, and sociology. He was influenced by one of his teachers, Renouvier, whose interest in the scientific study of morality, views on social cohesion based on the individual's dependence on others, preference for justice over utility, and advocacy of producers' associations and secular state education later became themes in Durkheim's work.² Durkheim also drew from Auguste Comte's work, particularly the idea that society could be studied scientifically and that the task was to establish exactly what the subject matter of sociology should be and to show how this discipline could be used to diagnose social pathologies in order to provide a guide to future action.

After his *agrégation* – a prestigious competitive examination for the recruitment of secondary teachers in France – in 1882, Durkheim became a philosophy teacher, and, during this period, he began to focus on the ideas that were eventually to be his doctoral thesis, as well as the core of his first book, *The Division of Labor in Society* (hereafter *Division of Labor*). He began to concentrate on the relations of the individual personality to social solidarity, and he came to see that the solution to the problem belonged to the new science of sociology.³ At the time, sociology was mainly seen as being associated with Comte and was looked upon critically by philosophers in France.

In 1887, Durkheim took up a position at the University of Bordeaux and, in the following fifteen years, produced three major works: *The Division of Labor*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and *On Suicide*; he also established the first sociological periodical, *L'Année sociologique*. In 1902, he moved to the Sorbonne, in Paris, and later became Professor of the Science of Education (only in 1913 did he become Chair of the Science of Education and Sociology).⁴ This appointment was met with considerable hostility, especially from the Catholic Right, who opposed giving the responsibility for teacher education to a secularist



Photo 7.1. Émile Durkheim was born in 1858 at Épinal, France. He is the theorist of social cohesion in which society is held together through shared values. Consequently, he became increasingly interested in religion and morality. He died in Paris in 1917.

and advocate of the new, controversial discipline of sociology.⁵ During this period, Durkheim's main sociological concern was the study of religion and morality, which led to the publication of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in 1912. His work on morality was never completed, and he died in 1917 at the age of 59. Durkheim's achievement was the founding of sociology as an academic discipline. His many publications attracted scholars to work with him and to help build a body of sociological work.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Several intellectual influences shaped Durkheim's analysis of society and his conception of sociology. An important one was Auguste Comte's discussion of scientific methodology, or positivism, as outlined in *A Course in Positive Philosophy*, published between 1830 and 1842. This

methodology posits an alternative to the dominant, speculative philosophical doctrines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which it sought to replace with knowledge based upon observation.⁶ As we discussed in chapter 3, Comte's "Law of Three Stages" depicts knowledge and human consciousness in three stages: the theological stage in which nature is understood in terms of the will of anthropomorphic gods; the metaphysical stage of knowledge based upon abstract, conceptual thought; and the final, positive stage based on scientific laws derived from the observation of facts. This evolutionary trajectory made speculative thought appear less developed. In addition, as Ken Morrison points out, Comte developed a system for comparing and ranking different sciences in which he showed that the most developed sciences, such as physics and biology, were positivistic and, therefore, more successful because of their use of scientific methods. In comparison, history,

philosophy, and economics appeared less advanced, and this critique provided a receptive climate for the spread of positivism in France and England. Positivism advocates the extension of the scientific method to the social sciences, including the abandonment of abstract analysis in favor of the search for law-like, causal regularities and the basing of knowledge on observation. Durkheim drew upon the influence of Comte in his attempt to establish sociology as a scientific discipline during his years at Bordeaux.⁷

A second influence on Durkheim's view of society was a philosophical perspective known as realism.⁸ From this perspective, social realities exist in a world that is external and independent of people's perceptions. According to realists, this external reality exists in the structures or customs of society, and these structures can restrain people by influencing how they behave, for example if they feel obliged to conform. Thus, these external structures can be seen as material objects of study; they can be observed in order to see how they affect people's behavior. These ideas will be discussed more fully in [chapter 8](#).

A third influence on Durkheim was the perspective of individualism that was prominent toward the end of the nineteenth century.⁹ The ideas of the Enlightenment and the political changes of the French Revolution raised the profile of the individual and increased individual political and legal rights. At the beginning of Durkheim's career, there was a strong sense in France that individual rights were undermining collective obligations and authority. Any perspective that viewed society as simply an agglomeration of individuals weakened Durkheim's effort to establish a discipline of sociology based upon the idea that society is an objective and constraining material reality, external to the individual. Durkheim opposed the utilitarian doctrine that was influential in the second half of the nineteenth century. The views of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, the main advocates of utilitarianism, put the freely acting individual at the center of social life. Such individuals, it was argued, pursue their own interests, especially private economic gain, and relate to society only if required by their pursuit of private utility. Society, in this theory, is based just on rational individuals merely pursuing their private goals. In *Division of Labor* Durkheim emphasizes that social order cannot be based only on freely contracting individuals because there are social rules regarding which contracts are just and there are moral codes concerning the honoring of contracts.¹⁰ In

addition, individuals are not analytically separate from society, as they cannot exist outside a social framework. Durkheim argues in *Division of Labor* that, historically, society precedes the individual and that only under certain social structural conditions can the idea or the reality of individual autonomy exist.

DIVISION OF LABOR

A central concern in Durkheim's first book is the relationship between the individual and social solidarity. He notes that there are two apparently contradictory movements – as individuals became more autonomous they became more dependent upon society – and he proposes that this contradiction can be resolved by changes in social solidarity flowing from changes in the division of labor.¹¹ Although Adam Smith discussed the division of labor in relation to the specialization of economic activities, Durkheim perceived it as a much broader process that affects political, administrative, judicial, and educational institutions, as well as being present in the arts, philosophy, and sciences. Debates in the study of biology extended the principle of the division of labor to organisms, as well as to societies: “It may even be stated that an organism occupies the more exalted a place in the animal hierarchy the more specialized its functions are.”¹² Thus, the division of labor is placed almost at the beginning of life and is considered a fundamental process within “the essential properties of organized matter” rather than a recent product of the intelligence and will of humans. In these terms, the increasing division of labor appears to be a manifestation of a general process, and Durkheim contended that it was becoming “one of the fundamental bases of the social order.”¹³

In his discussion of the functions of the division of labor, Durkheim gives a much greater significance to division of labor than does Adam Smith, who attributes it to the increase in production. Durkheim argues that the division of labor is the principal source of social solidarity, which “links those co-operating together at the present time” and provides “order, harmony and social solidarity.”¹⁴ Because social solidarity is a moral phenomenon that cannot be directly observed, Durkheim argues that an external index of social solidarity, such as a type of law, has to be noted. He identifies two types of law based upon the

different sanctions attached to them. The first type is penal law, which has repressive sanctions involving loss or suffering for the person who has infringed such laws. The second type includes civil, commercial, procedural, administrative, and constitutional law and has restitutive sanctions that consist in “restoring the previous state of affairs” to its normal form.¹⁵

Durkheim argues that, in small societies with little division of labor, there is mechanical solidarity based upon likeness, and, in such societies, there is a strong *collective* or *common consciousness* made up of the “totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of society,” which “forms a determinate system with a life of its own.”¹⁶ This collective consciousness continues to exist irrespective of which particular individuals live in a society at a particular time. It is separate from individual conscience, though it requires this for its continued existence. Crime, then, refers to an act that offends the collective consciousness. Durkheim states, “In other words, we must not say that an act offends the common consciousness because it is criminal, but that it is criminal because it offends that consciousness. We do not condemn it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it.”¹⁷ In a society with a strong social likeness and a strong collective consciousness, offenses against the collective consciousness are perceived as threats to social bonds – to something greater than the individuals, the very basis of the existence of society – and such a society calls forth vengeful penal sanctions. This reaction occurs because it is the society that “is harmed even when the harm done is to individuals, and it is the attack upon society that is repressed by punishment.”¹⁸ In societies of a mechanical nature, punishment of crime is repressive and has a quasi-religious nature because the crime offends a morality that “we vaguely feel is more or less outside and above us.”¹⁹ Revenge is extracted because crimes are against collective sentiments and are perceived as a threat to society. Penal laws reflect a type of social solidarity that is mechanical because it is based upon social likeness. People have a shared common consciousness, a shared psychic type, and a collective existence. Penal law represents mechanical solidarity wherein members of society share common states of consciousness, and the more extensively the common conscience regulates social life, the “more also it creates ties that bind the individual to the group; the more, consequently, social cohesion derives completely from this cause.”²⁰

In Durkheim's view, organic solidarity can be recognized when there are restitutive sanctions that are concerned with only a restoration of the normal situation rather than with punishment or disgrace. This is possible because repressive law is linked to the collective conscience, while restitutive law has feeble links with the collective conscience. Restitutive law is administered within specialized tribunals and systems of arbitration that are concerned with specific groups and specialized activities. Areas of law such as domestic law, contract law, procedural and administrative law, and constitutional law regulate the cooperation that derives from the division of labor. This body of cooperative law is restitutive and "exempt from the effects of the collective consciousness" because it governs specialized activities, ones that concern only a limited section of society, rather than being common to all. Without the central role of the collective conscience, these rules do not demand expiation and are concerned merely with regulating social relations.

The two forms of solidarity have different sanctions and types of law, and they also permit different degrees of personality or individuality. The form of solidarity that has a limited division of labor and a strong collective consciousness can be strong only if the ideas shared by all members are more intensively experienced than the ideas held by individuals. Durkheim explains the distinction: "The solidarity that derives from similarities is at its *maximum* when the collective consciousness completely envelops our total consciousness, coinciding with it at every point. At that moment our individuality is zero."²¹ The individual does not exist in this type of society and, indeed, individuality is a function of a different type of social solidarity, one that assumes individual differences. There has to be an element of individual personality that is not touched by the collective conscience in order for people to pursue their special functions. In this case, individuality can flourish, but it does not undermine social cohesion:

The more extensive this free area is, the stronger the cohesion that arises from this solidarity. Indeed, on the one hand each one of us depends more intimately upon society the more labour is divided up, and on the other, the activity of each one of us is correspondingly more specialized, the more personal it is. Doubtless, however circumscribed that activity may be, it is never completely original.

Even in the exercise of our profession we conform to usages and practices that are common to us all in our corporation. Yet even in this case, the burden that we bear is in a different way less heavy than when the whole of society bears down upon us, and this leaves much more room for the free play of our initiative. Here, then, the individuality of the whole grows at the same time as that of the parts. Society becomes more effective in moving in concert, at the same time as each of its elements has more movements that are peculiarly its own.²²

Durkheim calls this form of social solidarity – that attributable to the division of labor – organic, as it is analogous to the solidarity found in the organism of higher animals, where a biological unity is based upon the specialization of individual parts. So, specialization produces interdependence and cooperation among people who depend upon one another's expertise.

The basis of social order among those connected through mechanical solidarity is not just socialization, nor is the division of labor the only basis for social order among those connected through organic solidarity. The law has a role to play, too. Although the law appears in Durkheim's theory as an index of solidarity, in mechanical society it is a product of similar collective consciences, which, through the imposition of repressive measures, then "impose upon everybody uniform beliefs and practices."²³ The division of labor in advanced societies produces restitutive laws that regulate the divided functions. In addition, moral rules accompany each type of solidarity. Under mechanical solidarity, social activities are governed by extensive moral and religious rules. If a highly developed restitutive law exists and does not touch closely upon the collective conscience, there is still a need for moral rules. One source of moral rules, Durkheim believed, is the occupational morality that could be developed for each profession. Such moral rules and ideas of justice force individuals, when entering into commercial relationships, to consider the ends of others, to make compromises, and to consider ends beyond their own. Also, outside the occupational sphere in domestic or social situations, people have to consider their obligations; here, the state is increasingly "charged with reminding us of the sentiment of common solidarity."²⁴

This stress on the moral nature of organic society shows how Durkheim rejects the idea that social order in advanced societies

is based upon individuals pursuing their own interests through contractual relationships. He thus distances himself from utilitarian and laissez-faire nostrums. Durkheim argues that contracts cannot exist unless there is some socially derived moral force to ensure their regulation. He denies that a moral society could be replaced by one based upon the pursuit of individual economic interests. While cooperation has its moral basis, Durkheim sees the cooperative, interdependent society as one in which individual personality can become strong. Nevertheless, there is still a role for morality. Each profession has its occupational morality: among groups of workers or professionals, there are “opinions” and “usages and customs.” And although these are not enforced legally, they command obedience, “which none can infringe without incurring the reprimand of the corporation.”²⁵ People can choose their professions and the features of their personal life, and, although the rules and morals that are necessary to support organic solidarity limit individual initiative, they do not do so in the rigid way that the morality of mechanical solidarity does. The laws and morals of organic solidarity are not so repressive and are amenable to negotiation or change.

For Durkheim, there is an inverse relationship between the collective conscience and individuality. Initially, only tribal societies with mechanical solidarity existed, and because these were based upon identical groups or clans, they “comprise a system of homogeneous segments similar to one another,”²⁶ which he called segmental societies. The structure of organic societies is different because they are made up of a system of different organs with specialized roles and they contain their own differentiated parts. Gradually, organic societies grew, and the existence of features of mechanical solidarity became more hidden, although, as Durkheim believed, they never completely disappeared. The causes of this evolution need to be examined.

In Durkheim’s reasoning, the expansion of the division of labor comes about as the social segments lose their individuality, become more permeable, and combine in new ways. Such changes enable new relationships to develop among individuals who were previously separated. Individuals come into greater contact with each other as the boundaries between segments are loosened. Division of labor expands as interaction and commerce grow between segments – a process that Durkheim calls increasing “moral density.” In this process, territorial

segregation between segments declines, no matter whether the process occurs in a society of nomads, hunters, shepherds, or agricultural villagers. A further development is the rise of cities, which permit more intimate and intense contacts. Developments in communication and transportation also increase moral density as they reduce the gaps between segments.

Moral density also increases intrasocial relations, and its effects are multiplied when the population grows, producing an increase in social volume. This dual pressure results in an increase in the division of labor because the “struggle for existence becomes more strenuous.”²⁷ The division of labor enables people to avoid conflict by refining and specializing their tasks, and its benefits enable more people to be maintained and to survive. As a sociologist, Durkheim had a different outlook on the division of labor than did an economist: “We see how different our view of the division of labor appears from that of the economists. For them it consists essentially in producing more. For us this greater productivity is merely a necessary consequence, a side effect of the phenomenon. If we specialize, it is not so as to produce more, but to enable us to live in the new conditions of existence created for us.”²⁸

Durkheim theorized that, as society increases in volume, the collective consciousness becomes more abstract and cannot make specific demands upon personal conduct because the collective consciousness must then influence a larger population spread over a greater space. As society’s demands become less discrete and more universal, the collective consciousness leaves greater space for individual variation. The collective consciousness in segmental society is a traditional form of authority. One factor that breaks down this traditional constraint on individuality is the growth of the city; because the city is based upon the migration of people into its ranks, the power of segmental society and its collective consciousness erodes. The city dweller becomes cut off from authority figures. New ideas, fashions, and beliefs develop in this context where individuality and rationality gain more freedom to develop. Durkheim concludes, “As society spreads out and becomes denser, it envelops the individual less tightly, and in consequence can restrain less efficiently the divergent tendencies that appear.”²⁹ In the urban context, as moral density and volume increase, the individual is less watched and controlled, which enables the individual to escape such controls. The individual

becomes increasingly free of the collective consciousness, permitting greater individuality. Therefore, the division of labor is a function of the social structure. A segmental society encloses the individual within tradition, and, as structural changes weaken its grip, individuality and the division of labor can emerge.

Steven Lukes points out that the content of the collective consciousness changes in organic societies: because there are few collective beliefs that can take on the strength of religious character, the collective consciousness becomes more rational and secular.³⁰ Durkheim gives an exception to this thesis:

There is indeed one area in which the common consciousness has grown stronger, becoming more clearly delineated, viz., in its view of the individual. As all the other beliefs and practices assume less and less religious a character, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. We carry on the worship of the dignity of the human person, which like all strong acts of worship, has already acquired its superstitions. If you like, therefore it is indeed a common faith.... It is indeed from society that it draws all this strength, but it is not to society that it binds us: it is to ourselves. Thus, it does not constitute a truly social link.³¹

As we will discuss later, the place of human dignity in the collective consciousness had to be buttressed by notions of equality of opportunity, a work ethic, and social justice:

If, on the other hand, we call to mind that the collective consciousness is increasingly reduced to the cult of the individual, we shall see that the characteristic of morality in organized societies as compared to segmentary societies, is that it possesses something more human, and consequently more rational about it. It does not cause our activity to depend upon ends that do not directly concern us. It does not make us the servants of some ideal powers completely different in nature from ourselves, powers who follow their own course without heeding the interests of men. It requires us only to be charitable and just towards our fellow men, to fulfil our task well, to work towards a state where everyone is called to fulfil the function he performs best and will receive a just reward for his efforts.³²

In Durkheim's view, organic society does have rules, but they are concerned with the functions of each organ of society. Different parts of the division of labor have their own rules, moralities, and laws, but they do not restrict the broader freedoms of the individual. These occupational rules only invoke a small number of consciences and do not require or invoke a collective consciousness. His generally optimistic tone regarding the possibility of social cohesion within organic solidarity begins to change during his discussion of the moral nature of organic society and, especially, when he admits that there is "only reason to believe, as we shall see later more clearly, that in our present-day societies this morality has still not developed to the extent which from now onwards is necessary for them."³³

This theme reoccurs in Durkheim's discussion of the origins of the division of labor:

The division of labor can therefore only occur within the framework of an already existing society. By this we do not just simply mean that individuals must cling materially to one another, but moral ties must also exist between them. Firstly, material continuity alone gives rise to links of this kind, provided that it is lasting. Moreover, they are directly necessary. If the relationships beginning to be established during the period of uncertainty were not subject to any rule, if no power moderated the clash of individual interests, chaos would ensue from which no new order could emerge.³⁴

THE ABNORMAL FORMS OF THE DIVISION OF LABOR

Despite Durkheim's portrayal of the organic society as normal, in the last section of *Division of Labor* he discusses some abnormal forms of the division of labor, which he represents as pathological states.

Anomie

The first example, called *anomie*, refers to industrial and commercial crises and bankruptcies that represent a lack of adjustment in the division of labor. Durkheim says that the number of bankruptcies in France rose by 70 percent between the years 1845 and 1869. The

struggle between capital and labor is an example of conflict, rather than solidarity, that proceeds from increases in the division of labor.³⁵ Durkheim describes an industrial history in which conflict increases with successive changes in the division of labor and the organization of work. For example, the medieval workshop is described as a place of cooperation, equality, and regular interaction between the master and his workers. From the fifteenth century, Durkheim argues, a separation developed between workers and the employers, and each formed their own organizations, which would periodically come into conflict and engage in strikes and boycotts; however, the conflicts were not perpetual. From the seventeenth century on, with the birth of large-scale industry, workers and employers became more separated, work became more specialized and regimented, revolts become more frequent, and, as Durkheim wrote, the “war has become increasingly more violent.”³⁶

The existence of periodic industrial crises and conflicts shows that organic solidarity has not been perfectly achieved. In Durkheim’s analysis, this is not because of the decline of mechanical solidarity but because “all the conditions for the existence of the former [organic solidarity] have not been realized.”³⁷ In particular, the regulation of different functions did not develop properly. To facilitate cooperation and avoid constant conflict, a system of regulation is needed, which, in most instances, predetermines the way in which specialized organizations relate to each other. This system of regulation is an extension of the division of labor. If specialized organs relate and interact together in a mutual way, then these actions are repeated and become habits, which, in turn, may develop into rules of conduct. Mutually beneficial transactions among the functions of the division of labor lead to repetition or customary practices, and even become obligatory, but they are not the source of organic solidarity. This regulatory system grows out of the division of labor and helps it to function.

Durkheim argued that the necessary regulation did not exist in, or was out of step with, the current stage of the division of labor, and, therefore, “this lack of regulation does not allow the functions to perform regularly and harmoniously.”³⁸ Durkheim clearly believed that some form of regulation is necessary over and above the price mechanism that economists use as the device for regulating the relationship between supply and demand. The price mechanism cannot avoid

periods of disruption and instability, and the greater the complexity of social organization the greater is the need for regulation. If the division of labor does not produce solidarity in markets or factory systems, it is because they are not regulated; this lack of regulation is what he calls anomie. The state of anomie cannot exist if specialized organs have been in regular contact over time because regulation is consolidated in this way. Anomie arises when contacts are rare or infrequent or too new, and so each situation is one of trial and error. Durkheim takes the example of economic markets. In the segmental or mechanical type of society, markets correspond to each segment. Producers are near their consumers and can easily calculate the needs of the local population. With the advent of organic solidarity, the boundaries of these segments break down, and local markets expand so that they are national or even global in scale. Producers are no longer supplying a local and known market, and they cannot easily see the market's extent or limits. Production becomes unregulated, producers tend to overestimate or underestimate demand, and crises ensue.

Anomie also exists in the industrial factory system, which developed to service large markets and caused changing relations between employers and employees. The introduction of machinery to replace manufacture, the regimented discipline of the factory, the separation of the workers from their families during the working day, and the separate lifestyles of the employers and employees all required new organization and regulation. The rapid pace of growth of the industrial system meant that "the conflicting interests have not had time to strike an equilibrium."³⁹ Like Marx, Durkheim analyzed the effects of machinery: another manifestation of anomie is the experience of specialized workers who tend machines and perform repetitive work. This work is often performed as a monotonous routine, without interest or understanding, and the worker "is no more than a lifeless cog, which an external force sets in motion and impels in the same direction and in the same fashion."⁴⁰ One solution to this debasement of workers would be to provide them with a general education; but once they are accustomed to a concern with art or literature, Durkheim argues, they would find being treated as a machine even more offensive. Unlike Marx, however, he regarded the experience of the denatured and isolated worker as a product of the rapid development of specialization at work rather than as an inherent product of the capitalist division of labor. In its normal



Photo 7.2. Assembly-line production showing precisely timed repetitive tasks and socially isolated work, as described by Durkheim as anomic.

development, workers within the division of labor interact with their fellow workers in their different, but related, tasks. Durkheim explains:

He is not therefore a machine who repeats movements the sense of which he does not perceive, but he knows that they are tending in a certain direction, towards a goal that he can conceive of more or less distinctly. He feels that he is of some use. For this he has no need to take in vast areas of the social horizon; it is enough for him to perceive enough of it to understand that his actions have a goal beyond themselves. Thenceforth, however specialized, however uniform his activity may be, it is that of an intelligent being, for he knows that his activity has a meaning.⁴¹

Durkheim took up these issues again in his preface to the second edition of *Division of Labor*. Here he portrays economic life as unregulated, chaotic, and anarchic, where no one knows what their roles and obligations are and where great conflict and disorder exist. Those who defend market society do so because they believe it supports individual liberty, but he

argues that true liberty can only be realized when there is regulation by a superior moral force to prevent the abuse of physical or economic power.

For anomie in economic life to cease, there must be a group that can generate the rules that are needed. Durkheim thought that the state was not sufficiently involved in economic activities to be able to create adequate regulation, so he believed that each professional and occupational group, drawn from all participants in each industry and organized into a single body, should carry out this task. In general terms, such bodies would have to be capable of morally regulating national and international markets; therefore, they would have to include all members of an occupation distributed over large territories. National assemblies of elected representatives of employers and employees would head the corporations. Corporations would fix levels of production; wages and salaries; and the duties of agencies within the industry, both to each other and to the public. They would also be a source of employment law within each industry. Durkheim thought that such corporations would go beyond providing the economic and moral regulation of economic life to fulfill other needs such as education, welfare, and the cultural requirements of their members. They would establish a political organ between the individual and the state, especially because old sentiments toward local communities had weakened.

The Forced Division of Labor

A second abnormal division of labor is the forced division of labor; this point directs attention to structural inequalities and how these restrict people's opportunities and lead to oppression and, possibly, class conflict. Here, Durkheim entered the territory of class inequalities more usually associated with Marx, but instead of seeing such structural features as endemic to capitalism, he chose to see them as temporary features of the pathological state of the division of labor. The existence of classes, he thought, not only leads to the allocation of less rewarding and satisfying work to the lower classes but also can be the source of class conflict if people cease to be satisfied with restricted opportunities and if they believe that the restrictions can be removed. Because humans have different abilities and aptitudes – and if social solidarity is to develop with the division of labor – specialized tasks have to fit the individual's natural talents. The existence of classes and castes hamper

the spontaneous allocation of work to those with the appropriate aptitudes and abilities.

The inheritance of occupational positions through family ties is not in accordance with a spontaneous allocation of work. The children of those who own businesses may not inherit the needed aptitudes and abilities, and allocation along hereditary lines restricts the opportunity of others who may possess the necessary talents. Similarly, the hereditary transmission of wealth may give advantage to some, particularly in ways that are discrepant with their personal qualities. If the division of labor is spontaneous, however, “social inequalities express precisely natural inequalities.” Perfect spontaneity requires “absolute equality in the external conditions of the struggle,” even though this situation is never perfectly realized. In segmental societies, the collective conscience may legitimate inequalities in the way work is allocated, but in societies that have organic solidarity, contracts are central to social and economic life. In such contracts, through which people exchange equivalent values, the contract must be just, not a product of inequality. External conditions must become level:

Every form of superiority has repercussions on the way in which contracts are arrived at. If therefore it does not depend upon the person of individuals and their services to society, it invalidates the moral conditions of the exchange. If one class in society is obliged, in order to live, to secure the acceptance by others of its services, whilst another class can do without them, because of the resources already at its disposal, resources that, however, are not necessarily the result of some social superiority, the latter group can lord it over the former. In other words, there can be no rich or poor by birth without there being unjust contracts.⁴²

Social inequalities need to be reduced to allow a modern solidarity based upon the division of labor to function. Consequently, the need of a common faith to provide social order has to be replaced by a need of social justice.

In *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals*, posthumously published in 1957, Durkheim refers to the need to end the inheritance of wealth in order to prevent the forcing of unjust contracts upon the poor. The ending of inheritance within propertied families implies the handing over

of wealth to the corporations who would become the new heirs.⁴³ Also, in the conclusion of the second preface to *Division of Labor*, he states his support for the socializing of production. His discussion of the need to allocate people to tasks that are commensurate with their natural abilities and aptitudes and his reference to equalizing the external conditions in which people enter the competition for work appear to point in the direction of a meritocracy, where social inequalities would reflect natural inequalities only. Such appeals for economic justice reflect the arguments of socialists in his time.⁴⁴ Durkheim's analysis of social, structural, and moral change built upon the contrast between two types of social solidarity. His studies led him to the conclusion that a new type of social solidarity was possible based upon new forms of rights and duties, ones in which there would be more individual freedom and choice of action. However, this increased liberty requires the existence of rules and justice to regulate the more complex, specialized society. The shattered old morality cannot be resuscitated as it no longer corresponds to new conditions. Durkheim's diagnosis points to the need for a new goal – the creation of a new moral code – which cannot be created in the study of a social theorist but would have to be created in cumulative responses to emerging social strains and conflicts.

CRITICISMS

Durkheim was well informed of the ideas of Marx and other socialists, and he gave a series of lectures in 1895 in which he discussed the socialist ideology and the social conditions that gave rise to socialist ideas.⁴⁵ Durkheim did not find the class character and conflictual nature of socialist ideas attractive, and he regarded socialist ideas as a reaction to the tensions produced by the decline of social regulation and the injustice produced by class divisions. Durkheim's theory of anomie inspired the American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) to formulate his own theory of anomie. Recent scholarship has observed that while Durkheim's and Merton's theorizing have similarities, there are important differences between their two theories of anomie.⁴⁶ It is not surprising that Durkheim's theory of anomie, which is based upon organic solidarity rather than class conflict, would be criticized by Marxist sociologists for not referring to the structural contradiction between social

classes. The contrast between mechanical solidarity in simple societies and organic solidarity in complex ones is fundamental to Durkheim's theoretical position, but it has been challenged by Alan Hunt, who argues that the anthropological evidence suggests that Durkheim over-emphasized the role of repressive law in primitive societies and that, although his argument about the expansion of restitutive law is strong, there is evidence that the capitalist state has expanded some repressive laws, especially in relation to offenses dealing with property.⁴⁷

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Division of Labor introduces several reoccurring themes in Durkheim's work. One is the idea of social evolution from simple, mechanical solidarity to a more complex organic one in which there would be greater functional integration and social solidarity as well as greater independence for the individual. At the end of the book, he discusses the abnormal forms of the division of labor which prevent the realization of organic solidarity. The main abnormal forms are the lack of regulation in the market and the reduction of the worker to a "cog in a machine," both described as forms of anomie. The latter aspect of anomie refers to the nature of work in modern workplaces, which involves mind-numbing repetitive tasks in which the worker is often isolated from other workers and for whom the work is meaningless.

In the twenty-first century, digital platforms, definable as "virtual locations through which various users communicate and transact," are transforming the work experience and employment.⁴⁸ These platforms provide considerable scope for applying Durkheim's sociological concepts. Amazon is the largest and most successful online sales platform. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic surged, Amazon accounted for 40 percent of all online retail sales. Research by Helen Mulugeta provides comprehensive evidence of human rights issues within Amazon, including an inadequate safety culture.⁴⁹ Amazon's employees in the United States are three times more likely to be injured than the national US rate, due to an emphasis on performance goals and a psychologically stressful work atmosphere.

Algorithmic control at Amazon relies on barcodes, which contain digital information about products, as well as monitoring the employee's

performance through the use of individual handsets that directs workers' movements via the handsets or headphones as they fulfill orders. The work devices record how quickly orders are completed, as well as recording time spent "off task" – for example, washroom breaks – measured to the second by their devices and reported back to their supervisors. Alterations to work patterns – because of illness, family emergency, and so on – are assessed by rigid, unsympathetic digital algorithms. As one employee observes of management, "To them, we are like robots rather than people. The little things that make us human, you can feel them being ground out of you."⁵⁰ If their productivity is deemed too low, they may be automatically dismissed without human intervention by a manager. The application of algorithmic control systems at Amazon captures the deep integration of datafication in everyday labor, making use of data to manage both inventory and the labor process.

Amazon has been accused of racial, gender, and religious discrimination, in the case of the latter due to a lack of facilities and breaks, to enable workers to pray as mandated by their religion. Another feature of Amazon's is its vehemently anti-union culture, even though trade unions are an important part of a free society. Amazon has demonstrated a strong opposition to unionization for its 1.1-million work force in the United States.⁵¹ As part of its union avoidance strategy, Amazon holds sessions to discourage membership. The use of temporary labor discourages unionization, as workers are not employed long enough to get involved in organizing a union branch. Those who do join a union may find that they are given heavier jobs or overlooked for promotion. In *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, Jessica Bruder provides a different aspect of US work experience.⁵² Bruder recounts her time spent with mostly middle-class Americans who became homeless after the collapse of the housing market in 2008. Many resorted to living in a RV or campervan, with thousands camping within commuting distance of an Amazon warehouse or "fulfillment center." Bruder found that campervan dwellers had similar experiences at Amazon to those identified by Mulugeta.

"Anomie" for Durkheim and "alienation" for Marx refer to social conditions and individual psychological states. Lukes points out that Marx and Durkheim approached the issue with different hypotheses because they start from fundamentally divergent views of human nature and the natural condition of the individual in society.⁵³ As Lukes puts it, "Marx assumes that the full realization of human powers ... can

only take place ... when man [*sic*] can apply himself to any activity he chooses” and where he and other people “are not dictated by a system within which he and they play specified roles.”⁵⁴ Durkheim saw human nature as “essentially in need of limits and discipline.” People have potentially limitless and insatiable desires and, to be happy, have to accept limits to those desires. This vision of human nature, including some assumed differences between men and women, are discussed more fully in the next chapter. In Durkheim’s vision of organic society, people must be regulated by a superior moral authority; society must be meritocratic and have equal opportunities. Rather than being atomized individuals they will be attached to intermediary groups such as professional associations, which will regulate work and define clear rights and duties attached to each place in the division of labor.

Capitalism by itself is “an amoral system that requires rules,” and neoliberal-supporting corporate elites and politicians dismantled the rules, opines the Canadian writer Omer Aziz.⁵⁵ Numerous studies of retail and platform work have provided ample evidence of the dehumanizing effects – what would be interpreted as anomic by Durkheim⁵⁶ – when protections for workers are weakened or dismantled. The experiences of America’s nomadic RV dwellers can be interpreted as anomic. People have lost work and access to “sticks and bricks” in an extreme free-market economy which does not choose to regulate work or provide adequate housing and health care to all members of society. As Bruder implies in the title of her book those nomads are “surviving America.”

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 How did Durkheim reconcile the growing expansion in the division of labor and the threat that it would endanger social stability?
- 2 How did Durkheim explain how society evolved from a “mechanical” to an “organic” society?
- 3 What did Durkheim mean by “anomie” and the “forced division of labor”? Are they relevant concepts for the analysis of contemporary capitalist societies?

8

Émile Durkheim: Methodology and Suicide

Durkheim endeavored to establish a scientific method of studying society, one that focuses on society as a distinct level of analysis. He was opposed to the utilitarians, such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, who believed that isolated individuals were free to enter into contracts in the pursuit of self-interest and, thus, owed nothing to society. In *The Division of Labor*, he argues that contracts cannot exist unless there are preexisting rules and customs surrounding contracts that both enable and restrain contractual relationships. Durkheim argues that “collective life did not arise from individual life; on the contrary, it is the latter that emerged from the former.”¹ He wanted to establish a subject matter for sociology, which he believed needed to concentrate on a level of reality that is external to the individual. As a consequence of this level of focus, sociology, Durkheim argued, could be based upon the techniques of observation. He distinguished between the study of the mind of individuals, psychology, and the study of facts that are external to individuals, thereby challenging the idea that the individual is at the center of society. He was critical of French sociologist and social psychologist Gabriel Tarde, who argued that society is no more than the transmission of acts from one person to another through imitation.² Durkheim was also opposed to early sociologists such as Comte and Spencer, whom he thought were still too wedded to speculative theories of evolution rather than to an objective analysis based upon the observation of social facts. A contemporary student might think that a book

entitled *The Rules of Sociological Method* would contain a discussion of different ways of collecting information, such as surveys or focus groups. Instead, it is a highly polemical work concerned with establishing the new discipline of sociology and challenging individualistic, psychological explanations and philosophical speculation.

In this chapter, we examine Durkheim's thinking on "social facts" and his rules for the observation of social facts before explicating how suicide tested both his research methodology and conception of sociology. We end the chapter with a critique of Durkheim's formidable body of work on the study of suicide.

SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD

Social Facts

In his second book, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (hereafter *Rules*), Durkheim tries to make the method he developed in *The Division of Labor* more explicit. To begin, Durkheim establishes that there are *social facts* that are external to individuals and that affect how people act: "When I fulfil my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself and my acts, in law and in custom."³ These social facts are external because individuals do not create them and only become aware of their existence through education or socialization. Examples of social facts are the religious beliefs and practices that people hold, the language used to express thoughts, the system of currency, and professional practices; all of these function independently and exist independent of the individuals who live in a society at a particular time. He states, "Here, then, are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness."⁴

In addition, Durkheim argues that these social facts possess a "coercive power" and impose themselves upon the individual. In many instances, people consent and conform to the type of conduct expected of them and do not experience constraint unless they try to resist these social constraints when they become aware of their force. Also, whereas the law counters its violation with expiation or compensation for the

harm done, public attitude exercises a check on morality and administers less violent (though possibly more emotionally hurtful) punishments than does the law. The breaching of conventions such as dress codes or ways of speaking may lead to ridicule or ostracism. Durkheim writes, "Here, then, is a category of facts with very distinctive characteristics: it consists of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him."⁵ These social facts – which contain ways of acting and their representations – are not biological phenomena, nor are they psychological phenomena: they are outside individual consciences. Because the source of these facts is not the individual, Durkheim claims to have identified a new variety of phenomena to be called social: "their substratum can be no other than society."⁶ Consequently, "these ways of thinking and acting constitute the proper domain of sociology."⁷ In this view, people do not completely determine themselves: rather, "most of our ideas and tendencies come from without. How can they become a part of us except by imposing themselves upon us?"⁸

Some social facts, such as legal and moral rules, religious doctrine, and financial constraints, appear to be derived from social institutions; however, people might experience other social facts as feelings derived from social currents, such as the emotion that can develop in a crowd. Other social currents might be currents of opinion on religious, political, or artistic affairs. Another example given by Durkheim is the socialization and education of children: "All education is a continuous effort to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling, and acting which he could not have arrived at spontaneously."⁹ Social facts might be recognized by the way they are written down, communicated, or become a moral or legal rule. They take on collective dimensions as beliefs, tendencies, or practices, even though individual manifestations have their own features. Currents of opinion may impel certain groups to certain levels of marriage, birth rate, or suicide, which can be expressed in statistics, but the details of individual cases are concealed within the statistics.¹⁰ The domain of sociology is the study of social facts, and "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."¹¹

The Observation of Social Facts

Durkheim's next step was to establish some rules for the observation of social facts, which he believed could be considered things. Something has the character of a thing if it can be subject to observation – if it can be treated as data – and Durkheim (as was seen earlier) identified some specifically sociological facts. Social life is imbued with values, and, although these cannot be observed directly, it is possible to study them scientifically because there is a “phenomenal reality” that expresses them. For instance, morality is expressed in the body of rules governing conduct. Social phenomena are distinct from the “consciously formed representations of them in the mind” and can be studied “objectively as external things.”¹² These phenomena are objective because individuals cannot alter them with their will, and an understanding of them that reflects their nature has to be developed empirically. Laws are embodied in legal codes; statistical data are collected on social activities; fashions are preserved in clothing; and taste is developed in works of art: all of these take on an independent existence external to the consciousness of individuals. Later in the preface to the second edition, he refers to these social phenomena as “collective representations” that convey “the way in which the group conceives itself in relation to objects which affect it.”¹³ As Steven Lukes says, Durkheim's sociology of knowledge and of religion involved a systematic study of collective representations.¹⁴

The Normal and the Pathological

Durkheim was able to find a justification for science to be a guide to practical action by making a distinction between normal and unhealthy societies: “Briefly, for societies as for individuals, health is good and desirable; disease, on the contrary, is bad and to be avoided. If, then, we can find an objective criterion, inherent in the facts themselves, which enables us to distinguish scientifically between health and morbidity in the various orders of social phenomena, science will be in a position to throw light on practical problems and still remain faithful to its own method.”¹⁵ He defines *health* as the “perfect adaptation of the organism to its environment” and *morbidity* as anything that “disturbs this adaptation.” Because these arguments apply to living organisms, he thought they could be extended to societies; therefore, he needed criteria for

assessing the health or morbidity of societies, that is, for evaluating the “various degrees of completeness of this adaptation.”¹⁶ A normal, healthy society is one having the social conditions that are generally found within all societies – bearing in mind the stage of the society’s development, just as the young adult stage will be different from that of an old person.¹⁷ Morbid or pathological states are ones that depart from this normal state.

Durkheim applied his definition of normality to crime, which is commonly seen as a pathological condition. Although what is deemed to be crime varies between societies, he claims that all societies identify some acts as deserving of punishment. To say that the existence of crime is normal seems a startling conclusion. Durkheim does not say that crime is ever present because all societies contain wicked people, but he asserts that it is “a factor in public health, an integral part of all healthy societies.”¹⁸ Crime is normal because all societies have it and also because it offends the collective conscience. Crime is functionally useful to society because punishment reinforces the values that a crime offends, and some criminals could be harbingers of a new and more progressive morality.¹⁹

Rules for the Explanation of Social Facts

In the fifth chapter of *Rules*, Durkheim makes a distinction between the functions of a fact and the cause or origin of that fact. The demonstration that a fact is useful does not explain its origins. We may have a need for things, but we cannot will them into existence. So again, Durkheim uses his discussion of social facts to stress their independent nature and force and to distinguish between individualistic and sociological explanations: “But since each one of them is a force, superior to that of the individual, and since it has a separate existence, it is not true that merely by willing to do so may one call them into being. No force can be engendered except by an antecedent force.”²⁰ Causal and functional analyses are separate orders of analysis. However, taken together, they give a fuller understanding of a social phenomenon because a fact may need to have a function for it to survive. Durkheim was critical of Comte’s and Spencer’s discussions of society that were ultimately teleological and psychological. Rather than looking at society as based on individual psychology, Durkheim argued that society “exercises pressure on individual consciences”; it is an external impulse to which people submit.

The pressure exerted by society is the “pressure which the totality exerts on the individual”: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, a system formed by the association of individuals is a reality with its own characteristics. The group gives people ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are different than those that isolated individuals would have. “Collective representations, emotions, and tendencies are caused not by certain states of the consciences of individuals but by the conditions in which the social group in its totality is placed.”²¹ Sentiments are formed by the social group – by social organization rather than by the individual. For these reasons, sociological and psychological explanations are very different. Psychological states may be associated with social conditions, but rather than explaining social facts by psychological or innate human characteristics, sociologists explain these characteristics with reference to the preceding social facts. In other words, the sociologist is concerned with how the human milieu “exerts influence on the course of social phenomena.” Durkheim refers to two aspects of the social milieu that affect social existence: the volume or size of a society and its dynamic density. This last aspect refers to the number who share a common life, the extent to which social segments are fused, and whether a society has experienced the intensification of social life so that the horizons of individual thought and action can be extended.²²

Rules Relative to Establishing Sociological Proofs

Durkheim states that the only way to establish that a given social fact is the cause of another is to observe how one fact (the effect) varies in relation to another (its cause). In sociology, these social facts cannot be artificially produced in an experimental situation, so they must be observed as they occur in social situations by using the method of comparison, in what may be described as an indirect experiment. Owing to the complexity of social phenomena, Durkheim contends that the methods of agreement and difference are not applicable, particularly as it may be impossible to isolate all but one of the causal variables. Consequently, he argues for the utility of the method of concomitant variations, a method that can test the variation or movement between two variables. From the analysis of observed data, a sociologist may be able to deduce how one of two phenomena may produce the other. This

proposition will become clearer in the discussion of Durkheim's use of the comparative method in his study of suicide rates. Comparisons can then be made to test a theorized possible cause of a particular effect, and if the connection is verified through the comparison, the cause, it is said, can be proven. Durkheim suggested that, throughout history, there have been many variations in collective life, and sociologists can draw upon the evidence of this. Some evidence is present in all societies, including crime, suicide, birth rate, marriage rate, and the practice of thrift; these are manifest in different forms according to a diverse social milieu, such as geographical location, profession, or religious faith. In *Rules*, Durkheim sets out an argument for a causal science of the social world to achieve an objective analysis by treating social facts as things.

SUICIDE

Suicide was perceived in the late nineteenth century as a growing social problem, and it served as a test of both Durkheim's methodology and his concept of the field of sociology. As Durkheim defines *suicide*, "the term applied to any case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act, carried out by the victim himself, which he was aware would produce this result."²³ Psychology concentrates on individual factors such as character, temperament, or the features of an individual's life prior to suicide, but Durkheim emphasized the centrality of the suicide rate, which he argues is an objective social fact. He provides statistics for several countries and demonstrates that each tends to have a relatively stable suicide rate over a period of years unless there is sudden social upheaval. Suicide rates are thus seen as social facts; each society has its own tendency to produce voluntary deaths, and it is the social causes of these rates that constitute the sociological study of suicide.²⁴

Durkheim criticized explanations of suicide that are based on extra-social factors such as psychopathic or mental states, race, heredity, climate, and imitation. The elimination of individual and psychological explanations enabled him to develop his original theory regarding the connection between the total rate of suicide and different social contexts. He stressed that the focus should be on the general social state that produces suicides rather than on suicidal motives, which are only the most apparent causes and are "merely the individual repercussions



Photo 8.1. Suicide was perceived as a growing social problem in late nineteenth-century Europe, and it served as a test of Durkheim's methodology. Suicide rates are seen as social facts, and it is the social causes of these rates that constitute the sociological study of suicide.

of a general state ... One might say that they indicate the individual's weak points, those through which the current, which comes from outside inviting him to destroy himself might most easily enter."²⁵ Only later in his thinking does Durkheim consider how the general causes of suicide affect the individual in ways that produce suicidal acts.

Social Integration: Egoistic Suicide and Altruistic Suicide

Durkheim linked two types of suicide with the degree of social integration, by which he meant the feeling of attachment individuals have toward groups. He predicted that the suicide rate would vary inversely with the degree of social integration. When social groups have less of an integrative role, Durkheim argues, the individual's goals preponderate over communal ones, and the individual is more orientated to the pursuit of his or her private interests. This situation makes certain individuals susceptible to *egoistic* suicide, which originates from

excessive individualism.²⁶ Egoism is a cause of suicide “because the link that attaches [an individual] to society has itself been relaxed,”²⁷ which makes life appear purposeless. In contrast, when people are strongly integrated, they feel more constrained to fulfill their duties to society and less inclined to evade them by taking their own life. If people belong to a group they love, they feel less likely to let the group down; or if they have loyalties to group goals, they feel their own private troubles less.

RELIGION AND EGOISTIC SUICIDE

Drawing upon statistics from various sources in a range of countries and regions, Durkheim showed that, without exception, Protestants were much more likely than Catholics to commit suicide: the difference is from a minimum of 20 to 30 percent and up to 300 percent.²⁸ This difference cannot be explained by reference to religious beliefs because each religion condemns suicide. The significant difference, Durkheim insists, is related to the fact that Protestantism allows “a great deal more freedom of enquiry”²⁹ than Catholicism which, he says, is a more traditional, hierarchical system of authority in which believers accept a ready-made faith. In contrast to Catholicism, Protestantism, Durkheim asserts, enables individuals to be more the authors of their faith and allows more scope for personal judgment, which results in it having a weaker religious influence over people’s lives and, thus, in Protestants experiencing less social integration.

THE FAMILY AS PROTECTION AGAINST EGOISTIC SUICIDE

Durkheim reasoned that the family could produce greater social integration and have an effect similar to religion. The absolute figures he examined show that unmarried persons were less likely to commit suicide, and this finding confirmed the commonsense view that suicide is a way of escaping the burdens of life. An unmarried person could be seen to have an easier life, with fewer responsibilities. However, Durkheim points out that a more careful examination of the statistics shows that the reality is otherwise: the absolute figures for the unmarried include all persons under 16, and this age group had a low rate of suicide. After adjusting the rate for age, Durkheim demonstrates that the suicide rate for married people was less than that of the unmarried. In France during

the period 1889–91, for every million inhabitants, the suicide rate for 30–40-year-old unmarried men was 627, compared with 226 for the married men of that age; and the rate for 40–50-year-old unmarried men was 975, compared with 340 for married men in this age range.

Durkheim argues that the lower suicide rate among married men was related to the structure of the domestic environment. The family can be regarded as containing two different environments: the conjugal family of husband and wife, and the family that includes husband and wife and their children. Quoting statistics from the French census of 1886, he demonstrates that the state of marriage had only a slight preservative effect on men aged 40 to 50, since married men without children committed suicide only a third less often than unmarried men.³⁰ Furthermore, he reasoned that it is not the conjugal family that had the greatest preservative power, and that families with the most density (in terms of numerical size and frequency of interaction within families) had the lowest level of suicide. Thus, rather than increasing suicide by adding to the burdens of life, large families “are on the contrary, the daily bread without which one cannot survive.”³¹ Why does the family have this preservative value? Durkheim’s answer is that larger domestic groups have greater integration because there is a more intense and continuous interaction between relatives.

INTEGRATION OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND EGOISTIC SUICIDE

Typically, Durkheim begins his discussion with reference to comments of contemporary authors, who believed that, as political systems disintegrate, suicide increases. He points out that, ever since the collection of suicide statistics in European states in the nineteenth century, the evidence contradicts this view. In France, following the revolutions in 1830 and 1848, the drop in the number of suicides was about 10 percent. As the revolution spread throughout Europe, suicide declined as much as 18 percent in Denmark, Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and Austria. Revolutions in France produced a decrease in suicide in Paris, 13 percent fewer in 1830 and 32 percent fewer in 1832. Also, Durkheim refers to suicide statistics during political crises, election periods, and wars, in which a decline of up to 14 percent is recorded. Durkheim concludes that social upheaval and popular wars, which stimulate collective sentiments, patriotism, and national feelings, contribute to a stronger integration

of society. Durkheim reasons that crises produce struggles, and “since these oblige men to cling together in order to confront a common danger, the individual thinks less of himself and more of the community,”³² and this outlook leads to a reduction in egoistic suicide.

ALTRUISTIC SUICIDE

Durkheim believed that egoistic suicide was rare in Indigenous societies, but that three types of altruistic suicide, produced by insufficient individuation, were widespread: obligatory, optional, and acute. To describe the obligatory form of altruistic suicide, performed as a duty, he gives examples of societies in which death from old age or sickness was a disgrace, so old men would kill themselves to avoid dishonor. Such societies might reinforce these practices with the belief that those who took their own lives would enter a beautiful world or that those who had died of sickness or old age were condemned to a harsh and intolerable afterlife. In addition, some social customs expected a woman to kill herself on the death of her husband, and, in others, the followers and servants of a chief were expected to take their own lives after his death.³³ This type of suicide was the product of a socially defined duty, backed by religious sanctions and the loss of honor. Durkheim’s explanation of this type of suicide contains references to the lack of individuality, which was first expounded in his discussion of mechanical solidarity. For altruistic suicide to exist, there has to be little concept of individual personality, and the individual has to be absorbed into a highly integrated group. In Indigenous societies, the group was small, and the individual was easily, collectively supervised, thus preventing the emergence of individual egos as a source of resistance to a collective demand for the cessation of life.

Durkheim refers to the second type of altruistic suicide as optional, such as that which might occur in societies of Polynesia or among Indigenous Peoples of North America. This form of suicide was not expressly imposed by society, but it might be a culturally condoned act in defense of a person’s honor. In other words, it might be conventional for a person to commit suicide after offending someone or after a marital quarrel or a disappointment. Such acts, by which a person might avoid stigma or gain esteem, were enabled in cultures that placed little emphasis on individual interests. The third type, which Durkheim calls acute

altruistic suicide, refers to people taking their own lives “for the pleasure of sacrifice.”³⁴ Some religions of India furnish examples of this type of martyrdom, including the practices of seeking death in sacred rivers, allowing oneself to be crushed under the chariot wheels of the idol Juggernaut, or throwing oneself from a cliff into sulfur mines. Altruistic suicide is a product of over integration; this occurs when individuals have a goal beyond themselves, and their own life is seen as an obstacle to achieving this goal. Egoism produces feelings of “incurable lassitude and dreary depression,” but altruism is “derived from hope, because it comes from the fact that more beautiful prospects are glimpsed beyond this life.”³⁵ In contemporary society, as individual personalities become increasingly free from the collective identity, altruistic suicide becomes very rare.

However, Durkheim identifies the military as a social context in which altruistic suicide was chronic. The statistics for several European countries and the United States that compare suicide rates in the military with those for civilians show a difference of between 25 and 900 percent: Austria, the United States, and Italy had the highest incidence of suicide among their soldiers. One explanation could be that most soldiers are bachelors, but Durkheim demonstrates that suicide among French soldiers was higher than for unmarried civilians. Another explanation is the hardship of military life, but Durkheim shows that the suicide rate was higher for the longer-serving soldiers who had reenlisted, and it was higher for officers, whose conditions were more comfortable. Thus, suicide was most associated with soldiers who chose a military career and who possessed the “acquired habits or natural predispositions that make up the military ethos.”³⁶ Durkheim deduced that the explanation of such high suicide rates was the culture within the army, which lacks individualism, as soldiers have to follow and not question orders. This lack of individualism in the army makes it a unique institution of modern society and one characterized by the high integration and low individualism of tribal societies: “The military mind is itself in certain respects a survival of primitive morality. Under the influence of this predisposition, the soldier kills himself at the slightest disappointment, for the most trivial reasons, for a refusal to grant leave, for a reprimand, for an unjust punishment, for a hitch in promotion, for a matter of honor, for a passing fit of jealousy or even quite simply, because other suicides have taken place before his eyes or to his knowledge.”³⁷

Social Regulation: Anomic and Fatalistic Suicide

ANOMIC SUICIDE

In addition to integrating individuals by developing their sentiments, society regulates and controls people. Durkheim developed two more types of suicide based upon the degree of regulation of the individual. Anomic suicide is related to a lack of regulation, wherein society begins to lose its ability to set adequate restraints upon individual desires. Durkheim discussed anomie in relation to economic crises, which he demonstrated led to increases in the suicide rate. He referred to a financial crisis in Vienna in 1873–4 that led to a 70 percent increase in suicide. The same crisis induced a 45 percent increase in suicide in Frankfurt-on-Main in 1874. A crash on the Paris Bourse in 1882 produced an increase of 11 percent in the three months closest to the time of the crash. Bankruptcies also reflect the vagaries of economic life. The average increase in bankruptcies between 1845 and 1869 was 3.2 percent, but it was 26 percent in 1847, 37 percent in 1854, and 20 percent in 1861. Suicide increased on average in this period by 2 percent per year, but, in each of the years of high bankruptcies, it increased dramatically: 17 percent in 1847, 8 percent in 1854, and 9 percent in 1861.³⁸

Once again, Durkheim challenged a commonsense explanation, that suicide increases because poverty has increased, and life has become more difficult. If suicide varies according to the level of poverty, the rate would be expected to decline in periods of prosperity. Durkheim provides statistical data relating to Italy during the 1870s and 1880s that indicate people were enjoying a period of economic growth, yet suicide rates increased annually in the 1870s from 29 per million during 1864–70 to 40.6 per million in 1877. After the unification of Germany, there was commercial and industrial expansion, but suicides increased by 90 percent between 1875 and 1886. To further enhance his claim that poverty does not stimulate higher suicide levels, he cites as examples the low suicide rates of poor countries or areas, such as Ireland, Calabria in Italy, Spain, and the poorer regions of France. Poverty, he concludes, appears to be a protection from suicide. He proposes that industrial and financial crises, no matter whether they produce more poverty or greater prosperity, increase the number of suicides because they disturb the social order.³⁹

Durkheim's explanation of the suicidal impetus of social disturbances involved his views on human nature and social regulation. He asserted, "No living person can be happy or even live unless his needs are well adjusted to his means."⁴⁰ If a person's needs cannot be granted, then there is friction and dissatisfaction, which reduces the will to live. Durkheim reasoned that animals have material and instinctive needs, but, once these are satisfied, they do not ask for anything else. An animal's "power of reflection is not sufficiently developed to imagine other ends than those implicit in its physical nature."⁴¹ It is much harder, however, to decide upon limits to the appetites, needs, and wants of human beings, and such limits are not to be found in human biological or psychological nature. In Durkheim's view, the attachment to life becomes weakened when the demands of life cannot be satisfied because of insurmountable obstacles or because the pursuit of one demand just leads to another one. Hence, Durkheim writes, "[f]or things to be otherwise, it is above all necessary that passions should be limited. Only then can they be harmonized with the faculties and then satisfied."⁴² An external moral force that people feel is just, which they respect, and to which they can respond spontaneously must accomplish this limitation. This moral power is society, which is superior to the individual. Society can create laws, set limits beyond which the passions cannot go, and it "alone can assess what prospect of reward should be offered to every kind of official in the common interest."⁴³

Durkheim believed that there is usually awareness, in the moral consciousness, of the worth and lifestyle appropriate to different functions within the social hierarchy and that these set limits to ambitions and expectations. These relative limitations, though, are not static; they are subject to gradual change over time and as conditions change; they "make men content with their lot, while at the same time giving them moderate encouragement to improve it; and it is this average contentment that gives rise to feelings of calm, active happiness, to the pleasure at being and living which, for societies as for individuals, is a sign of health. Each person, at least in general, is then in harmony with his condition and wants only what he can legitimately wish for as the normal reward for his activity."⁴⁴

This superior, moral, socially derived consciousness usually governs people's behavior and normally overrides the demands and needs that are ultimately located within the nature of the human as a biological

organism. When there are sudden social crises, this moral constraint may temporarily lose its effect, leading to a sudden increase in suicide because individual aspirations are stimulated. Whether these crises introduce poverty or prosperity, it takes time for the moral conscience to reestablish itself, and, for a while, people do not know what aspirations are just or unjust, what the limits are, and what demands and hopes are reasonable. In this period of anomie, passions are less disciplined. At times of upheaval such discipline is most needed because the relations within economic functions are shaken up and social conflict may arise as a result. According to Durkheim's theory, in this context, the desire to live is weakened.

Economic crises can produce fluctuations in the suicide rate, but, in Durkheim's vision, anomie is in a chronic state in the sphere of trade and industry. He argued that industrial relations became less regulated as traditional religion and the guilds lost their moral hold over the relations between employers and workers – the ability to explain and limit aspirations was lost. Markets had been extended beyond the local region, potential gains greatly increased, and expectations excited: "From top to bottom of the ladder, desires are aroused but have no definite idea on what to settle. Nothing can appease them, since the aim towards which they aspire is infinitely beyond anything they might attain."⁴⁵ The constant pursuit of new experiences, pleasures, and novelties led to a situation in which people had become disillusioned with a finally meaningless "endless pursuit" of new pleasures, sensations, and novelties. According to Durkheim, the people who worked in trade and industry in the modern economy were the least regulated by the old mechanisms of restraint, and these workers had a much higher suicide rate compared with those employed in agriculture – people who, Durkheim concludes, were still subject to some of the old forms of regulation.

FATALISTIC SUICIDE

Durkheim confines his comment on the fourth type of suicide – fatalistic suicide – to a footnote at the end of the chapter on anomic suicide, and he only includes it for the sake of theoretical completeness. This type is the opposite of anomic suicide and is a social consequence of excessive regulation; people kill themselves whose futures are "pitilessly confined and whose passions are violently constrained by oppressive

discipline.”⁴⁶ Thinking it was of little contemporary significance, he gave very few examples and cited only the suicides of young husbands and married women who were childless. Historically, the term could also be applied to the suicide of slaves, because of their excessive regulation. Pearce points out that Durkheim’s formulation of fatalistic suicide is too cryptic and that the notion of over constraint and repressive discipline could be extended to the phenomenon of the forced division of labor,⁴⁷ as discussed in the previous chapter. Inheritance and privilege influence how people are recruited or excluded from positions in the division of labor. If this inequality in the allocation of people to work is seen as unjust, and if it were perceived as an unalterable constraint, then, in Pearce’s view, it could produce potentially suicidal conditions. Durkheim believed that the rapid increase in suicide in the most industrially advanced parts of Europe was due to the rapid transformation of the social structure, which had destroyed old social institutions without putting anything in their place. He reasoned that those established religions, the family, and the state were not able to provide sufficient influence over individuals, resulting in the increase in egoistic and anomic suicides. The social structure had changed in ways that reduced the ability of society to inculcate a collective morality and adequate restraint over individual desires. He returned to the idea of occupational associations,⁴⁸ which he believed could order social life at a level between that of the individual and that of the state and, thus, act as a new source of regulation and morality.

CRITICISMS

Durkheim was convinced that suicide rates, which remain stable unless there is a sudden change in the social environment, demonstrate that society has an influence on behavior, that the investigation of this influence is distinct from the study of behavior (the realm of psychology), and that it is possible to examine social regularities, such as suicide rates, scientifically. The American sociologist Jack Douglas, in *The Social Meanings of Suicide*, presents a review and criticism of all *sociological* literature on suicide, and raises the issue of motives in the context of the decision-making processes of officials such as police, doctors, and coroners who decide, often when the evidence is far from

conclusive, whether or not a death was a product of suicidal motives.⁴⁹ These decisions involve a reconstruction of the events leading to death and a weighing of the circumstances of and possible motives for suicide. These deliberations open up the possibility of subjective judgment at the base of the official statistics, which are the “facts” that Durkheim relies upon in his analysis.

Although he was aware of these problems, Durkheim dismisses deliberations on the motives for suicide by officials as liable to error and not actually relevant to understanding the deeper causes of suicide. Douglas, however, raises some serious issues concerning how suicide statistics are socially constructed. For instance, in Catholic societies, officials may be reluctant to identify a death as a suicide because of its implications for the deceased’s salvation in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Douglas also argues that suicide statistics are a product of negotiation. Articulate, high-status people may be able to influence the designation of the type of death by the coroner’s court in a way that minimizes the total of recorded suicides for these groups, thus casting doubt on Durkheim’s theory. Parkin argues that there is insufficient evidence to establish that social groups do systematically organize themselves in a way to influence the courts.⁵⁰

Other criticisms of Durkheim have been forwarded by feminists. Canadian sociologist Rosalind Sydie, in *Natural Women, Cultured Men*, offers a trenchant critique, arguing that Durkheim’s “analysis of sex roles is colored by [his] understanding of natural dichotomies between the sexes. This belief in the invariable significance of biological difference means that the hierarchies of power in society, which relegate women collectively to a subordinate status to men, are taken as givens that do not require sociological analysis.”⁵¹ Sydie points out how Durkheim was struck by figures that showed suicide rates varying according to marital status – with married women tending to commit suicide more often than either single women or married men, when wives were not allowed to divorce. His conclusion, according to Sydie, about the societal institution of marriage’s effect on a woman was that it “does her less service than it does man.”⁵² To explain why husbands and wives react differently to the marital situation, Durkheim resorted to a combination of assumptions about their different biological and intellectual capacities. The husband has to limit his desires and “find happiness in his situation”; his wife is also duty-bound “not to fail

him,” providing him with pleasures which are not only “circumscribed” but also “assured and this certainty constitutes his mental bedrock.”⁵³ In contrast, the bachelor may become prey to sexual anomie because he has no restriction on his aspirations, and his life opens up “endless new experiments raising hopes that are dashed and leaving behind them a feeling of weariness and disenchantment.”⁵⁴ When divorce is allowed, the regulatory powers of marriage are weaker, as the “moral calm and tranquility that made the husband strong are reduced”⁵⁵ and the commitment to the restraints of marriage are less heeded because marriage is not guaranteed.

In Durkheim’s opinion, men need indissoluble marriage and women benefit from less severe marital bonds, as “the sexual needs of a woman are less intellectual in character, because, in general, her intellectual life is less developed.”⁵⁶ Thus, biology makes her sexual needs more restrained, so she does not require such a strict social regulation as monogamous marriage. Durkheim’s analysis of the different functions of marriage for men and women, and the opposing interests of men and women, which lead to more suicides for men if divorce is allowed and more for women if it is prohibited, produces a sociological impasse. He appears to prefer a solution that favors and protects men until women take up a more equal participation in social life. Yet his views about the trends in the division of labor include the greater public participation of men, which makes them more intellectual and less organically governed than women, and the psychological differences between the sexes mean that efforts to reduce the differences between men and women will take a long time to work out and cannot be resolved by imminent legal changes alone. In answer to those who demanded that women be granted equal rights with men, Durkheim cautioned, “They are too inclined to forget that the work of centuries cannot be abolished in an instant; and that ... such legal equality cannot be legitimate as long as there is such flagrant psychological inequality.”⁵⁷ Thus, Sydie argues, “Durkheim’s account of the roles and functions of the sexes based on the idea of the ‘natural’ and therefore unchangeable dualities of physiology and psychology is no more than a continuation of a tradition in Western social theory. However, it is particularly interesting that Durkheim’s sociological imagination deserted him when it came to dealing with the prejudices of his time regarding the capacities and roles of the sexes.”⁵⁸

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As was seen in the discussion of anomic suicide, Durkheim believes that, in stable economies, there are collective beliefs concerning the appropriate rewards that different functions or social classes (as we would say today) should expect for their labor. In neoliberal capitalism, there has been a rapid widening of the divide between the rich and the poor in terms of income and wealth. The extremely high incomes of the wealthiest in the population and the lack of a consensus about what are reasonable incomes and disparities in wealth can be seen in Durkheimian terms as evidence of chronic anomie. Since the 1980s in the United States, Canada, and Britain, income and wealth differentials have widened. Figures from the Canadian Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) show that the top 1 percent's share of family net wealth increased by approximately 5 percent between 1999 and 2019.⁵⁹ The PBO found that the richest 1 percent of families held 24.8 percent of wealth, whereas the bottom 40 percent of families owned 1.1 percent of total wealth in 2019. The PBO reported that there were approximately 160,000 families in the top 1 percent in 2019 and they each had wealth of at least C\$6.3 million.

The left-leaning Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives focused on the incomes of the 100 highest-paid CEOs of companies listed in the TSX index and found that in 2021 their average compensation was C\$14.3 million, 243 times the income of an average worker in a year.⁶⁰ In Britain, figures produced by the Equality Trust in 2022 show that the richest 20 percent had an income more than 12 times the amount earned by the poorest fifth.⁶¹ Since 1980, the share of income earned by the top 1 percent in the UK has generally been rising, peaking at 14.7 percent in 2007 before the financial crisis.⁶² Britain's Office for National Statistics revealed that the average annual pay for a FTSE-100 chief executive is £3.4 million (C\$5.7 million) compared with the average full-time worker's income of £33,000 (C\$55,110). Consequently, the High Pay Centre calculated that by the third working day in January 2024 an FTSE-100 CEO would have earned the annual salary of an average full-time worker.⁶³ In *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*,⁶⁴ Thomas Picketty's distributions analysis between workers and the 1 percent social elite makes inequality concrete and is a visible exemplar of new thinking around the campaigning "we are the 99 percent" slogan.⁶⁵

Against this backdrop, there has been a growing hostility, and clearly a lack of moral consensus, regarding both the widening gulf between rich and poor and the high levels of remuneration received by corporate chief executive officers. This last factor, in particular, can be seen, in Durkheimian terms, as a deeply embedded source of anomie. From June 2022 to July 2023, Britain experienced strikes involving workers in transport, communications, health, education, and the civil service, including barristers withdrawing their services. According to Britain's Office for National Statistics, an estimated 2.472 million working days were lost between June and December 2022 alone.⁶⁶ The major issues were around pay, but other aspects of working conditions – often a product of austerity and government cuts to public services over the previous decade – were also involved. These conflicts provide examples of a lack of moral consensus, the existence of dissent, and a growing desire to regulate some forms of corporate excess which are indicative of what Durkheim would have regard as anomie.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 Social integration and regulation are key features of Durkheim's analysis of suicide. How did Durkheim define and apply these terms to the study of suicide?
- 2 Why did Durkheim reject psychological explanations of suicide, and why did he say that suicide rates were social facts?
- 3 Why did Durkheim argue that marriage protects men from suicide more than women, and did his discussion at this point make assumptions based upon values prevalent in his time?

9

Émile Durkheim: Religion and Education

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life is widely regarded as Durkheim's most important work. In it, he demonstrates his evolutionary approach to the study of society by choosing to study religion in its most simple form. In his analysis of the totemic religion of Indigenous Australians, he explains how religion is based upon the awareness of a force that genuinely exists and is a source of moral authority, although his scientific explanation goes behind the appearance of things in the eyes of believers. The work is also a theory of knowledge, as religion is seen as the first way in which human beings articulate their understanding of the world. It has already been pointed out that Durkheim was employed at Bordeaux and Paris to lecture, primarily to trainee schoolteachers, which enabled him – against much opposition – to introduce sociology as an academic discipline within higher education. Two courses of lectures on education were published after his death and show how he regarded education as a source of morality and how he explained the evolution of education as a reflection of social structural conditions.

This chapter begins by first engaging with Durkheim's writings on religion and then proceeds to examine his ideas on the sociology of knowledge and education. It concludes with a critique and discussion on the contemporary relevance of his ideas.

THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

Durkheim wished to carry out a scientific analysis of religion, so he chose to study the religion of the simplest society in order to understand humanity's religious nature, which he believed is an essential and permanent aspect of human culture. He argued that an institution such as religion could not rest on an error or a lie; otherwise, it would flounder on the resistance to it of social reality. Primitive religions, he argues, "are rooted in reality and are an expression of it."¹ The reasons that individuals give to explain their beliefs are most likely to be mistaken, so it is the task of the scientist to "reach beneath the symbol to the reality it embodies and which gives it its true meaning."² The study of the religion of Indigenous Australian "tribes," he argues, enables the scientist to study the features of a religion in its most essential aspects, in the absence of the complexities that develop with the evolution of religion, and to relate these features to the Indigenous people's social conditions.

Durkheim's study of religion is more than a study of the social basis of religion: he declares early in his work that religion is the original source of theories about the nature of the world and is thus the basis of science and philosophy. Furthermore, he argues that religion has shaped forms of knowledge, and that basic categories of thought such as notions of time, space, genus, cause, substance, and personality – without which it would be impossible to have shared reasoning – have their basis in primitive religious beliefs. A central part of Durkheim's argument is that religious representations are collective representations that are created when the assembled group participates in rituals, which create and reinforce certain mental states. Similarly, the categories of thought that are created through religious beliefs and ceremonies are social things. Durkheim takes a position on the nature of knowledge that differs from the two opposing doctrines of *apriorism* and *empiricism*. The first views the basic categories as logical and independent of the human mind and human experience; the second views them as subjective and dependent upon the personal experience of the individual. A problem with apriorism is that categories of reason appear to have a reality of their own based upon the power of reason, the basis of which remains unaccounted for. The problem with empiricism is that if knowledge is based upon individual experience, then the idea of reason itself, as a form of impersonal rationality, is jettisoned. Durkheim believed

that he had found a solution that considered the objections to each position, and he regarded categories of thought as products of the meeting of many minds over space and generations. Thus, individual experiences contribute to the intellectuality of the group. From the experience of the collectivity, then, an agreement emerges concerning what can be logically accepted: “This is the authority of society coloring certain ways of thinking that are the indispensable conditions of all common action.”³ A discussion of Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge will be taken up again after a discussion of his sociology of religion.

The Definition of Religion

In his definition of religion Durkheim states that religious phenomena can be divided into beliefs and rites and that all religious beliefs classify the representations of material or ideal things that people devise. He presents two comprehensive but opposing categories – the *sacred* and the *profane*.⁴ The first refers to beliefs about spirits, myths, legends, and the nature of sacred things and their powers; even a rock, a tree, or a vegetable can be imbued with a sacred character. Rites, also part of the sacred, are actions that are fixed, such as words or formulaic ways of speaking that relate to sacred beliefs and that may be said by consecrated persons. Everything else belongs to the category of the profane. The sacred and the profane are conceived as two separate worlds, with nothing in common, and may even be seen in the human mind as antagonistic. Hence, they cannot intermingle, and boundaries have to be set to demarcate when people may move between the two. Human-kind and its gods have a mutual dependency, according to Durkheim: just as a people depend upon their gods, the gods depend upon people performing rites in their honor, such as offerings or sacrifices; otherwise, the gods would die.⁵

Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.”⁶ The identification of religion’s communal nature enabled Durkheim to distinguish between magic and religion. The former contains beliefs and rites as well, and it calls upon similar forces. The difference lies in the collective nature of religious beliefs, which, as Durkheim stressed, are held by a collective

group of people who profess the same beliefs and practice their religious rites. Magic is different. There might be a collection of magicians who share beliefs, but they do not share them with a wider community of worshippers. The magician has a clientele, not a church, and does not have a continuous relationship with a body of worshippers.

Two existing theories of religion, *animism* and *naturism*, come under a detailed critique. Animism refers to the origins of religion as being located in the experience of dreams, which leads to the religious experience of spirits, the soul, demons, and deities with a human-like consciousness and superior powers.⁷ Naturism locates the experience of the “great cosmic forces” of nature as the source of an inexhaustible force.⁸ Durkheim’s critique of each of these theories amounts to the same kind of refutation. He argues that each is based upon the notion of hallucination, but each would have been seen for what it was and could not have convinced people throughout the centuries. Prayers, chants, and feast days could rarely appear to produce the desired control over nature or protect people or produce other desired results. The all too frequent failure of these rituals would have persuaded people that their beliefs were false. Therefore, Durkheim asserts that all beliefs in religion and myth “must have some objective foundation,” despite being “mistaken about the true nature of things.”⁹ Something else must have given man a sense of an “infinite power outside him to which he is subject,”¹⁰ and this idea figures in Durkheim’s theory of people’s sense of the divine.

Totemic Beliefs

Durkheim’s study draws mainly on research by European anthropologists who had researched Indigenous societies in central and northern Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples are the First Australians, meaning they were there for thousands of years prior to European colonization.¹¹ There are many different and distinct Indigenous groups in Australia, each with their own culture, language, beliefs, and practices.¹² Adopting intrinsically Eurocentric notions of Indigenous peoples, Durkheim divides his study into an examination of religious beliefs and rites, and, although these are interdependent, he begins by outlining the totemic beliefs of First Australians. He interprets Australian “tribes” based upon communities that have two exogamous groups called *phratries*; each of these phratries contains several clans. Clans

constitute a basic element of collective life, and, although clan members are not related by blood, “they regard each other as part of the same family.”¹³ They bear the same name, and they respect mutual obligations as recognized among kin, including vengeance, mourning, and the avoidance of intermarriage. The name of each clan is its own totem, which usually is a plant or an animal with which the clan believes it has a special relationship. Usually, individuals receive their clan names from the mother, who lives in the territory of the father, who, according to rules of exogamy, is of a different clan.

Durkheim describes Australian Indigenous life as akin to a federation of clans in which each clan has its totem. According to early European researchers, the worship of the clan totem is the most frequent level of religious experience among First Australians and the one that Durkheim particularly focuses on. Each phratry and community also has its totem, and entire communities sometimes meet to carry out totemic ceremonies such as initiation rites. He describes how totemism is a religious system of the whole Indigenous community.¹⁴ Each clan has a name, such as “crow” or “white cockatoo,” which Durkheim describes as an emblem, coat of arms, or flag. Images of the totem are reproduced on things owned by the clan, such as weapons, and even on the bodies of men during religious ceremonies. A totem is the name of the clan, but its use in religious ceremonies demonstrates how it is also a sacred thing. Each totem group has a collection of sacred pieces of wood or polished stone called *churingas*, which feature in their sacred rites, and which have engraved drawings that represent the group’s totem. Some of the wooden ones, usually referred to as bullroarers, have holes pierced in them, and, with the use of a thong, they can be swung rapidly in the air to make a loud noise during ceremonies. The *churingas* are the most sacred possession of the clan, and profane persons such as women and uninitiated young men are not allowed to touch or see them. Where they are stored between ceremonies (perhaps in a small cave) is kept hidden, and the uninitiated are not allowed near this sacred place. The *churingas* are believed to possess special qualities: touching them can cure wounds and illnesses. They can confer power on the totemic species and ensure its successful reproduction, and they can give men strength and weaken their enemies. They are not just useful to individuals, rather the “collective fate of the whole clan depends upon them.”¹⁵ The stone or wood *churingas* are similar to many other objects, except they are painted or



Photo 9.1. A churinga.

carved with the emblem of the totem, and this marking is what makes them sacred.

The animals or plants that are related to the totem of a clan are also sacred. Restrictions surrounding the *churingas* are much greater than those related to access to the totemic animal or plant that commonly exists in the profane world. From this fact, Durkheim concludes that the images of the totemic being are more sacred than the totemic objects.¹⁶ In fact, he identifies a hierarchy of sacredness: first the emblem of the totem, then the totem, and then each member of the clan are invested with a sacred nature. The Indigenous Australian, Durkheim explains, believed that people are both human and also an animal or plant of their totemic species. Although this belief may be hard for others to understand, Durkheim says it was made more plausible for the clan member through myths that tell of the common origins of the totemic being and the clans folk. The emblem of the totem, the totemic species, and the clan members share elements of sacredness; however, men have more sacred dignity than women and the uninitiated young members of the clan, and old men have the greatest religious nature. Nevertheless, totemism is not

the worshipping of animals or plants; both humans and their totemic beings are seen as sharing a degree of sacredness. Totemism is a shared religion of “a kind of anonymous and impersonal force that is found in each of these beings though identical with none.”¹⁷

This anonymous and impersonal force is independent of particular individuals, and it preexists and survives them. While individuals die and are succeeded by new generations, this force remains constant. It is, Durkheim states, “an impersonal god, without a name, without a history, immanent in the world, diffused throughout a multitude of things.”¹⁸ Through his own European prism, Durkheim believes the members of Australian Indigenous communities are not aware of this

force in an abstract way but sees it as a material thing, as an animal or plant, though the basis of the cult is an energy that is diffused throughout the universe. Each clan within the community has a notion of these forces as belonging to its totem. These forces, which have a physical aspect upon which life is seen to depend, also have a moral aspect that obliges a person to behave in particular ways toward other members of the clan, or to perform certain rites. In addition, in common with other religions, the ritual practices of totemism give people more confidence in their dealings with the world.

THE ORIGINS OF TOTEMIC BELIEFS

The totem is the symbol of the god and the symbol of the clan. So Durkheim reasoned that the god of the clan, the totemic principle, must be the clan itself, “transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal species that serve as totems.”¹⁹ In order to explain how this came about, Durkheim describes how life in the Australian clan alternated between two different phases. For most of the time, the population was scattered in small groups of hunters and gatherers providing for their needs. At agreed-upon times, people would congregate in particular places where the entire clan would meet for periods of several days or weeks to participate in religious ceremonies. This lifestyle offered a stark contrast between a mundane existence, which was the profane part of the life of the First Australian communities, compared with a time of enacting sacred rituals, during which the proximity of individuals generated a stimulating environment and a state of high exaltation. Durkheim, quoting European anthropological studies, describes the excitement and tumult created during the whirling of bull-roarers, the chanting and rhythmic dancing often enhanced by firelight, and the subsequent collective effervescence and unleashing of passions. In these circumstances, individuals would feel that they had entered into relations with extraordinary powers. In the context of First Nations people, religious activity was concentrated in these periods of collective effervescence when, Durkheim believes, the religious idea was born: “Therefore it is in these effervescent social settings, and from this very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to be born. And this origin seems confirmed by the fact that in Australia, strictly religious activity is almost entirely concentrated in the times when these assemblies are held.”²⁰

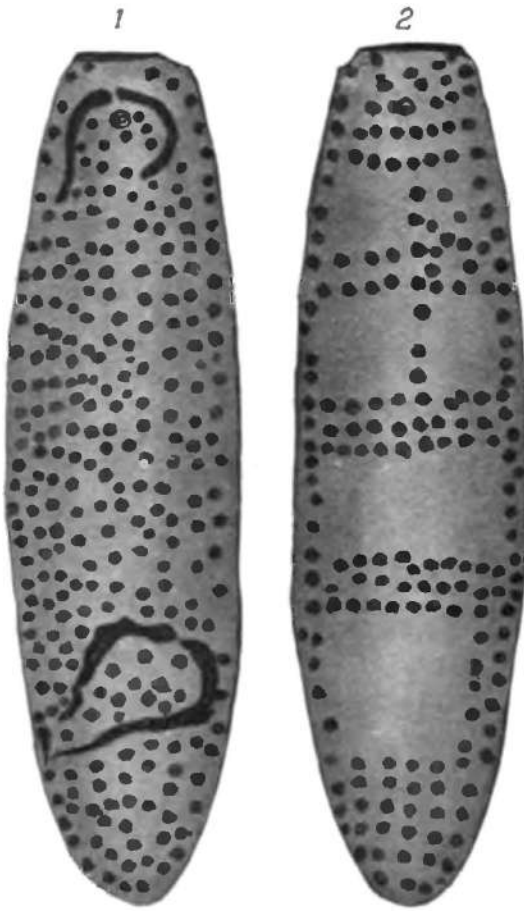


Photo 9.2. A bullroarer.

When the clan meets, it “awakens in its members the idea of external forces that dominate and exalt them,” but the clan is “too complex a reality for such rudimentary minds to picture clearly its concrete unity.”²¹ The individual does not see that the group has generated these feelings or that the group is capable of generating new energies with the power to transform people. Furthermore, these new sensations are experienced at a time when the emblem of the group is everywhere – on the *churingas* and painted on the bodies of the assembled clan members. Later, when people see the totem’s emblem again, their memories of that state of heightened emotions are revived. When people congregate, and the emblem is everywhere during

these gatherings, mysterious forces are generated, which the Indigenous Australian believes emanate from the clan’s emblem. The totem is seen to be the source of actions that benefit or harm the clan, so the clan must take action to influence this force by performing rites addressed to this foremost of sacred things. Owing to the resemblance between the clan’s emblem and the animal or plant from which the clan takes its name, the actual animal or plant takes on sacred qualities, and it ranks above a human in the sacred hierarchy. Although the religious force of the totem appears to be external, it can only be realized through the active participation of clan members; they come to imagine that the totem is immanent in them and that they too have a religious character, though to a lesser degree.

Being in opposition to animism and naturism, Durkheim rejects the notion that religion is based upon physical or biological sensations and, therefore, is no more than a hallucination. In a key passage, he states that “the worshipper is not deluding himself when he believes in a higher moral power from which he derives his best self: that power exists, and it is society.”²² The exalted experience of the clan member is real and is “really the product of forces external and superior to the individual.” It is a mistake to believe that this heightened vitality is a product of the power derived from a plant or an animal, but “there is a concrete and living reality.”²³ For Durkheim, the main purpose of religion is to provide a system of thought that enables individuals to imagine the society to which they belong and their relationship with it. In particular, religion refers to “an eternal truth that something exists outside us that is greater than we are, and with which we commune ... god is merely the symbolic expression of society.”²⁴ Rather than the act of worship strengthening the ties of the worshipper and a god, they strengthen the ties between the individual and society because “god is merely the symbolic expression of society.”²⁵

TOTEMIC RITES

Durkheim identified negative and positive rites. The *negative rites* comprise various prohibitions on behavior, which serve to preserve the separation between the sacred and profane. Prohibitions on profane behavior and the suffering of privations make the individual feel more elevated and on a level with sacred and moral forces. The *positive rites* refer to bilateral relations between humans and the totemic forces. Durkheim draws heavily from the writings of European anthropologists who studied the Arrernte or Arunta people, a group of Indigenous people who live in the Central Australia region of the Northern Territory. Anthropologists described a ceremony referred to as the *intichiuma*, which appeared to be a widespread practice among other Indigenous groups as well. Among the Arunta, this ceremony starts at the beginning of the rainy season, which brings forth a sudden appearance of vegetation. The first phase of the ceremony is concerned with the preservation of the prosperity of the animal or plant species that is the clan’s totem. Members of the community believe that their ancestors had left rocks in the places where they had disappeared into

the ground. These imperishable rocks are seen as a source of life for the totemic species; because these rocks ensure the reproduction of the totemic species and allow people to continue to draw upon their powers, they must be visited annually. The ceremony of the Witchetty Grub clan, for instance, involves all the men of the community walking solemnly around the sacred site, stopping at rocks that are thought to represent the grub, and striking the rocks to displace some dust that is regarded as the seeds of its life. The dust is dispersed by men who wave tree branches in the belief that they are maintaining the abundant reproduction of the grub that the clan both protects and depends upon.²⁶

In a second phase of the *intichiuma*, the usually strict prohibition against the eating of the totem animal is lifted for a short period of time. In the Witchetty Grub clan, the grubs are gathered, cooked, and crushed into a powder, some of which the chief and the elders consume in a solemn ceremony. Durkheim interprets this type of ceremony, which took similar forms in other Indigenous communities, as containing the essence of the institution of sacrifice that can be found in many more advanced religions.²⁷ Consuming the sacred totem enables clan members to incorporate its sacred principle within themselves, but because the sacred principle's powers gradually erode, it must be replenished periodically.

In the first phase of the *intichiuma*, men of the clan assist in the fecundity of the totemic species to ensure that it survives. In the second phase, "man" borrows from the species "the forces necessary to sustain and restore his spiritual being. So, we can say that it is man who makes his gods, or at least makes them endure, but at the same time it is through them that he endures."²⁸ Thus, the celebrations of the totemic cult bring about the renewal of belief in the gods, and they bring "internal and moral renewal" in the participants. Ritual life is circular, and so is social life, as the individual absorbs from society cultural values and mores, language, science, arts, and morality – all of what makes a person civilized. If the individual's idea of society dies and social beliefs and traditions cease to be held, then the society will die. So rites possess an efficacy, though not the one perceived by the participants. They enable the creation and perpetuation of the gods – of a moral entity that is society – making individuals and their community feel stronger. Common beliefs are strengthened, and the individual soul "is regenerated, too, by

immersing itself once more in the wellspring of its life; subsequently, it feels stronger, more in control of itself.”²⁹

SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge is intricately woven into his sociology of religion. Religion, he argues, was always a cosmology as well as a theory of the divine, and thus philosophy and science grew out of religion. In addition, he argues that basic categories of understanding – ideas of time, space, genus, number, cause, substance, and personality – which are the basis of all thought, originated in religion.³⁰ Religious rituals are collective assemblies that produce collective representations about the relationship between humans and their gods; therefore, ideas about time or space, for instance, originate in these collective religious representations. Durkheim puts forward a sociological approach to knowledge that does not rely on the idea that categories are a priori in the human mind or a product of individual experience.

Durkheim argues that religions give a total representation of the world, and, within Australian totemism, all things within the universe are part of the Indigenous community and all people and objects are allocated between the clans. Those things that are allocated to an individual’s clan, whether animate or inanimate, “are parts of the body of which he is a part.”³¹ Durkheim gives a number of examples. For instance, the Mount Gambier Indigenous community is divided into two phratries, the Kunmite and the Kroki, and each of these has five clans. Everything in nature belongs to one or another of these clans, so everything in nature is classified under ten totem-like species, under their own genera. While men and women may be identified with crows or white cockatoos, natural phenomena are also divided into their respective totems: rain, thunder, lightning, clouds, hail, and winter, for example, are also part of the crow totem. The way in which the notions of genus or class are formed was modeled on social organization: “Because men formed groups, they were able to group things; they classified things simply by placing them in groups they had already formed ... the social groups they belong to are themselves interdependent, and through their union form an organic whole – the tribe. The unity of these first logical systems merely reproduces the unity of society.”³² Durkheim uses this

example to demonstrate that the notion of category can be a product of social organization. Initially, it could have been based on each phratry having opposing dichotomies – a white cockatoo in one phratry and a black cockatoo in the other or one clan linked to the sun and the other to the moon and stars. Categorization could also be based on similarities: the black cockatoo is linked with the moon, the white cockatoo with the sun. Durkheim writes, “Of course, we cannot always understand the obscure psychology that presides over many of these affinities and distinctions. But the preceding examples suffice to demonstrate that a certain intuition of similarities and differences evident in things has played a role in creating these classifications.”³³ In Durkheim’s view, the classification of categories, a genus, is a tool of thought, invented by people, that comes from society and not from some *a priori* existence outside us. “Society has provided the canvas on which logical thought has operated.”³⁴ This canvas consists of a religion in which humans and natural phenomenon are linked. This system of religious thought enabled people to think that there are internal connections between things and that these can be categorized according to opposition and agreement; therefore, Durkheim insists, religion contains the basic elements of scientific thought.

Durkheim argues that the idea of a vague, anonymous force that influences people’s minds and material objects was, in totemic religion, the earliest form of a later secular version found in the natural sciences.³⁵ Religion and science are, Durkheim insists, concerned with nature, people, and society: “Religion endeavors to translate these realities into an intelligible language that is no different in kind from the language employed by science; both involve connecting things to one another, establishing internal relations between them, classifying them, and systematizing them.”³⁶ If religion is based on society and science originates in religion, then, ultimately, knowledge is based in society, whether this reflects the way that space is divided up between social groups or how time is defined socially to enable people to meet to perform rites or participate in feasts. Similarly, Durkheim relates concepts – the material of logical thought – to society because, in order for people to communicate, concepts must be shared: thus, they are collective representations of the community. Concepts represent social ways of thinking that contain general and permanent properties and combine the collective wisdom and knowledge, accumulated over centuries, with

what personal experience can teach. Systems of concepts, derived in this way from society, help people to think impersonally in ways that surpass their own experiences.³⁷

Durkheim provides a critique of theories that assume that religious experience is grounded in hallucinations, which are themselves based on psychological perceptions or on the experience of nature, and he argues that, for religion to persist, there has to be some form of underlying reality, which he identifies as society. This argument supports his own version of sociological rationalism, but to those who believe in a divine basis for religion, it must appear little different to the view that religion is based upon hallucination. Durkheim's belief that society is a moral phenomenon buttresses his view that society needs some kind of religion or system of unifying beliefs: "No society can exist that does not feel the need at regular intervals to sustain and reaffirm the collective feelings and ideas that constitute its unity and personality."³⁸

This reaffirmation of morals is based on meetings or assemblies in which individuals come into close contact and reaffirm their common feelings. According to Durkheim's analysis, humanity is now in a period of transition, and it is hard to imagine what future ceremonies will be like: "The ancient gods grow old or die, and others are not yet born."³⁹ New cults cannot be created; they have to emerge from life. There will be new experiences of collective effervescence and new formulae will grow to serve humanity for a time; however, in an age when science is dominant, religion will have to accept its findings. As science slowly accrues knowledge, there is, according to Durkheim, still a place for religion to "run ahead of science and develop theories about living and acting."⁴⁰

SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

During his years in Bordeaux and Paris, Durkheim was primarily employed as an educationalist, and, although his regular lectures on education to trainee teachers may have interrupted his sociological work, they provided him with opportunities to reiterate many of his favorite themes, such as the relationship between individuals and society, his theory of evolution, and his views on social solidarity. Durkheim referred to a crisis in secondary education that had been felt since the

second half of the eighteenth century. Economic and moral changes in society meant that the old educational ideals were inadequate; in the Middle Ages, the goal was the creation of dialecticians, and, after the Renaissance, it was the creation of humanists. However, he argued that there was no clear notion of what conception of a human should be created through secondary education in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France.⁴¹ Durkheim supported secular state education, and this too was a matter of political contention.

Durkheim points out that a historic perspective on education shows that different periods have different educational organizational objectives, because education is shaped by custom, religion, political and economic organization, and the existing state of science. Education is the system of interaction between adults and youth in which a society attempts to create an "ideal of man" in terms of certain physical, intellectual, and moral states that each person is expected to possess. In addition, as society becomes more complex, education has to provide attributes that enable more specialized roles to be carried out. Education is a form of socialization of each new generation of asocial and egoistic beings, making people into social beings by exposing them to religious, moral, national, and other collective beliefs to enable them to lead a social life. It is a short step from this position to see education as the instrument through which society "represents the best in us" by making children into adults.⁴²

In the course he taught on moral education, Durkheim's task was to provide a conception of secular moral education for state elementary schools, which he regarded as the guardians of French national character. He argued that morality is not beyond scientific analysis; to accept that would mean accepting that something is essentially irrational. During a period in which people were becoming more rationalistic and individualistic, religion was thought to be losing its force. It had become, Durkheim believes, necessary to separate morality from religion, though, in the process, new moral tendencies and demands for justice would emerge. The role of the teacher, he argues, was to help new generations become conscious of the new ideal and also to "excite in them a desire to add a few lines of their own."⁴³ Rather than teaching children a list of virtues, education's first task, according to Durkheim, was the determination of the basic elements of morality, namely, the fundamental mental states that could be adapted to particular circumstances. He

believes that moral rules are a subtype of rules that are obeyed not because of tradition or personal benefit but because they are outside the person, and they prescribe ways of acting that people cannot alter: an authority backs those rules and demands their respect. Obedience is a duty that is derived from a spirit of discipline. This is the first element of morality. The idea of discipline is a basic component of morality in Durkheim's argument because, drawing on his theory of human nature, he believes that there have to be constraints upon people's passions to prevent egoism and anomie. For Durkheim, discipline is a key factor in education. Convinced that it is necessary for children's appetites to be restricted, he believes these could be defined in ways that lead to happiness and moral health so that children can have realizable goals that are compatible with their abilities. This is not a static view of human aspiration. Durkheim argues that, with historical change, human nature changes and so do the boundaries of people's realizable expectations.

Durkheim further argues that moral acts are always in pursuit of impersonal ends, and once theological ideas are ruled out, the only superior entity is society. Therefore, moral authority comes from the social groups of which people are members, but the group itself is superior because it outlives the individual members. Thus, "we are moral beings only to the extent that we are social beings."⁴⁴ Durkheim refers to how society is superior to the individual, arguing that individuals owe so much to society – language, culture, and personality – and they are prepared to see society as the source of authority. Attachment to groups is the second element of morality. He states, "When our conscience speaks it is society speaking within us."⁴⁵

The third element of morality in Durkheim's theory is autonomy or self-determination. The scientific knowledge of the natural world enables us to know how the external world works, and, because we understand this, we accept its constraints and know we have no alternative. As Durkheim states, "We liberate ourselves through our understanding."⁴⁶ If people understand the nature of moral rules and scientifically investigate the reasons for their existence in society, they can make rational decisions. As he puts it,

Now we are able to check on the extent to which the moral order is founded in the nature of things – that is in the nature of society – which is to say to what extent it is what it ought to be. In the

degree that we see it as such, we can freely conform to it.... Thus, on condition of having adequate knowledge of moral precepts, of their causes and of their functions, we are in a position to conform to them, but consciously and knowing why. Such conformity has nothing of constraint about it.⁴⁷

Durkheim concedes that the science of morality is less developed than are the natural sciences, but he believes that, if people knew the reasons for moral imperatives, they would obey voluntarily and desire this obedience because they would know why the moral rules exist. Science can empower people to know and influence things that exert a control over them. The third dimension of morality is this “enlightened assent.” The role of a teacher in a modern secular society is to teach modern secular morality – to help the child understand the rules to abide by and to make him “understand his country and his times, to make him feel his responsibilities, to initiate him into life and thus to prepare him to take his part in the collective tasks awaiting him.”⁴⁸

After discussing the elements of morality, Durkheim turned his attention to educational psychology and the development of morality in the child. The school is a socializing agency between the family and the wider society; school rules and the social life of the classroom introduce the child to the spirit of discipline. The teacher should impress upon the child the general nature of these rules by which all people, the teacher included, are constrained. The infraction of such rules should be punished by blame and by making it clear that others disapprove of this behavior.⁴⁹ Consequently, Durkheim was opposed to corporal punishment in schools because contemporary morality is one of moral individualism based on freedom and human dignity: “One of the chief aims of moral education is to inspire in the child a feeling for the dignity of man. Corporal punishment is a continual offence to this sentiment.”⁵⁰

Attachment to the group is the second dimension of morality, and, in this respect, Durkheim identifies the school environment as one in which the child may experience a collective life that is more intense than the quieter life within the family. He argues that participation in this extended collective life enhances the child’s being. Class life should not be sober but have a joyful aspect – which appears rather like a less intense version of the experience of some of the rites described in simple

religions – and the teacher is encouraged to stimulate a sense of class identity or spirit.⁵¹ The third level of morality in Durkheim's schema – autonomy or self-determinism within a moral system – requires people to evaluate their moral choices. Durkheim drew upon the elementary introduction of natural sciences into the school to give the child a sense of the complexity of things and the role of experimental sciences.⁵² In order to make moral choices, people need to be aware of social reality, and, in view of the lack of development within the social sciences, Durkheim identified historical knowledge as being capable of making pupils aware of social forces that have shaped their society and those features of the collective consciousness that have formed French national character. The teacher should highlight those historical events and instill in children a sense of how they are a product of what has gone before them. Durkheim thought that teaching the history of the child's society would strengthen his or her attachment to society and imbue the child with a sense that each individual is part of the "complex of ideas and sentiments, ways of seeing and feeling, a certain intellectual and moral framework distinctive of the entire group. Society is above all a consciousness of the whole. It is, therefore, this collective consciousness that we must instill in the child."⁵³

In the course of his lectures in 1902, Durkheim gave a structural and historical analysis of the development of secondary education in France from the early Middle Ages. Because the Christian church had a mission to shape the individual, schools grew up as moral communities attached to cathedrals and gradually became secondary schools and universities. The church was the link between the Roman and Germanic societies, and it initiated people into "the only culture which then existed, namely classical culture."⁵⁴ However, because there was a tension between Christianity and the classical culture that was the product of pagan Greco-Roman society, Durkheim discussed how classical education selected features from that culture. He argued that, in the early Middle Ages, the stress was on grammatical formalism, which was followed by a dialectical formalism. Changes in social class and educational philosophy in the sixteenth century ushered in a preference for the study of classical literature as the best way to mold pupils' minds. The closing of the wealth gap between the leisured classes and the nobility made the former desire to imitate the politeness of aristocratic society. Durkheim has been criticized for neglecting the relationship between social class and

education, but, in this regard, he does describe the educational philosophy of the humanists as an ideology based on the values of aristocratic and leisured classes, which neglected the educational needs of masses of people “for whom education should have raised their intellectual and moral standards and improved their material condition.”⁵⁵

CRITICISM

Durkheim’s study of religion and education have drawn criticism. But before we reflect on his work, it is important to emphasize that, as with other texts we discuss in this book, “a text does not speak for itself,” because we frame it by our own worldview and cultural make-up, “before we let it speak at all.”⁵⁶ Our assessment of Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is framed by a postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism, which informs the aspects of Durkheim’s work we choose to critique. From this standpoint, Durkheim’s ideas are influenced by Eurocentric scholarship. We noted in [chapter 1](#) that as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the words *monogenism* and *polygenism* to explain “race” appeared in anthropological writings. Durkheim’s study of First Australians is through a European cultural lens, and this would blind, or severely limit, Durkheim from appreciating the significance of “race” and from truly understanding the complex culture and religious practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The cultural and intellectual context for Durkheim’s work is the White racial logic in which European supremacy defined the methods and processes of reasoning anthropologists employed to study Indigenous life.⁵⁷

As we point out in a later chapter covering Du Bois’s sociology, the reductive assumptions European academics make about the civilizations and peoples beyond Europe have the effect of confining the non-European to a subordinate racial, cultural, ontological status.⁵⁸ And, besides, concepts and ideas are never neutral, and of particular relevance here, the notion of “race” or, more accurately, racial stratification, as a social construct served the European colonial and capitalist systems of exploitation and subjugation. The postcolonial critique of Durkheim’s work, the reductive and stereotyping orientation of the “primitivist” representations of Indigenous peoples, is itself not without

criticism. Although acknowledging that it is not exempt from Eurocentric assumptions, recent scholarship argues that Durkheim's work on religion leaves an "invaluable legacy" for understanding of the rituals through which humans (re)create their social identities and their forms of belonging and solidarity.⁵⁹

Durkheim stresses that religious beliefs are not based upon some kind of hallucination. However, to argue that religious experience is a product of the membership of society seems not much different to those who have faith. As Massimo Rosati puts it:

Durkheim's approach highlights how the believer, worshipping a transcendental and superior being that he identifies with God or with some mysterious force, is both right and wrong. He is wrong insofar as the content of what he represents to the mind through religious belief is not what he imagines it to be (God or another extrasocial force); he is right in that the content is something that is transcendent and superior to him, namely society.⁶⁰

With regard to Durkheim's sociology of education, he is concerned with securing social stability and consensus:

Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual, and moral states which are demanded of him *by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined*.⁶¹

As Kieran Allen and Brian O'Boyle, two specialists on Durkheim's work, argue, Durkheim was connected to senior educational officials within France's Third Republic, and Durkheim's books on education were "partisan publications to promote the republican agenda."⁶² His approach to morality reflects the "needs of particular classes" within the French Republic. There are problems also with his pedagogy which assumes the school passes on moral authority in a top-down way and does not consider how children spontaneously create their own social values, including ones that oppose the school.



Photo 9.3. A lack of rules relating to the treatment of prisoners in Iraq has been seen as a sign of anomie in a contemporary war situation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As explained previously, Durkheim thought that the old religions had lost their powers, but he was aware that any new religion – even one based upon the cult of the individual – and human dignity require some kind of assembly of the community to reinforce beliefs. Thus, Durkheim's sociology presents possible new insights into the study of culture; social bonding and regulation; the reworking of social solidarity; and, as his discussion of corporations shows, the role of civil society in maintaining social solidarity.

In modern terminology Durkheim's expression, the "cult of the individual" refers to a discourse of human rights. The German sociologist and social theorist Hans Joas points out that Durkheim was the first person to discuss, during the political upheavals of the Dreyfus scandal, how the human person had become the most sacred object in society. Joas writes:

This human person, the definition of which is like the touchstone which distinguishes good from evil, is considered sacred in the ritual sense of the word. It partakes of the transcendent majesty that churches of all time lend to their gods; it is conceived of as being invested with that mysterious property which creates a void about sacred things, which removes them from vulgar contacts and withdraws them from common circulation. And the respect which is given it comes precisely from this source. Whoever makes an attempt on a man's life, on a man's liberty, on a man's honor, inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous in every way to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol is profaned.⁶³

Because offenses against the individual offend this new collective conscience, Joas discusses its impact on criminal and civil law and the resultant changes in eighteenth-century penal policy. Individuals may become increasingly included in political and legal rights, but, as Joas persuasively argues, the rights are not universally upheld because there are counterpolitical forces. That human rights are not universally defended has been affirmed by the United Nations' Human Rights Watch, which has reported egregious human rights violations across the world including by the United States and Britain.⁶⁴ Durkheim's anomie

theory – defined as *dérèglement* (derangement), that is, a “rule that is a lack of rule” – can offer a sociological explanation of the systematic abuse of human rights and torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, for example. United States government reports and the analysis of testimony given at the court-martial trials relating to the abuse at Abu Ghraib show that anomie was ubiquitous within the US military.⁶⁵ Similarly, evidence of alleged human rights abuses undertaken by Russian soldiers in occupied areas of Ukraine suggests that anomie endures within the Russian military. These, and other less extreme contemporary examples, support our central argument of the continued relevance of Durkheim’s ideas.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 Durkheim argued that the members of Australian clans worshipped something that was real, but not the forces that they believed to be real. Critique his conclusion.
- 2 How does Durkheim’s theory of knowledge and religion support his thesis that society needs some kind of system of collective beliefs?
- 3 What are the main features of Durkheim’s sociology of education, and why is it regarded as conservative?

10

Max Weber: Methodology

So far we have examined how classical theorists forged conceptual tools for explaining modernity in terms of materiality, through the works of Marx and Engels, and morality, through the works of Durkheim. Like Marx and Durkheim, Max Weber is widely recognized for his substantive analysis of Western capitalism and modern forms of life. For Weber, a society is constituted through rationally calculated and goal-directed human action, and wholesale rationalization comes to dominate Western culture and institutions. Weber is also recognized as a pillar of sociological thought, but his identity as a sociologist is ambiguous. Although he was a cofounder of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (German Society for Sociology), Weber conceived of himself first and foremost as a political economist. Among Anglo-Saxon scholars, Weber's role as a founding figure of sociology has alternated since the 1980s between "in doubt" to "resurrection."¹ More recently, Weber, along with Georg Simmel, has been considered the most contemporary of the sociological canon, even representing the first signs of postmodernism.² And others posit that "Weber is one of the sources of our culture."³

Whereas Durkheim's work was influenced by Comteian positivism, by contrast, Weber's earlier writings provide a powerful critique of positivism in the social sciences. In his later writings, he develops a method of interpretive understanding, *Verstehen*, in his discussion of methodology. His discussions on concept formation, objectivity, and causality still inform sociologists with an appreciation of the central unresolved

problem of values and objectivity in social research. Weber's methodological writings make sense only within the context of the intense debates from the 1880s among German intellectuals on issues of epistemology and methods in the social sciences.⁴

In this chapter we investigate the intellectual genealogy that shaped Weber's *Methodology* written in response to the famous *Methodenstreit*. We examine the methodological argument within the social sciences over the nature of science, causality, validation, and history – that is, a contextual understanding of his work.

LIFE AND WORKS

Max Weber was born on April 21, 1864, in Erfurt, a small city in the southeastern region of Germany. Shortly after his birth, the Weber family moved to Berlin. Weber's parents were polar opposites. His mother, Helene Fallenstein Weber, was a devout Calvinist, a woman of culture and piety who led an ascetic life, and it was her austere Puritanism that came ultimately to shape Max Weber's personal ethics.⁵ His father was a lawyer and politician who, in contrast to his wife, led a hedonistic lifestyle. He was also allegedly a stereotypical Victorian: a disciplinarian to his children, arrogant and insensitive to his wife. The dissonance between his father's values and lifestyle and his mother's orientation to life negatively affected Weber's psychological development and shaped his intellectual direction. The family home attracted local artists, intellectuals, and business and political elites, so the young Weber was exposed to the educated "chattering class." After taking his *Abitur* and completing high school, Weber entered the University of Heidelberg and chose to study law, his father's profession. He also chose to follow his father's social life: drinking and partying a lot and studying a little. After a twelve-month stint in the military, he returned to his parents' home and resumed his academic studies at the University of Berlin, moving later to the University of Göttingen. As a student, Weber was financially dependent on his father, a situation he progressively grew to resent. And, in the eight years living with his parents, he gravitated toward his mother's values and orientation to life while his antipathy to his father increased. Young Weber became a disciplined and conscientious student. In 1889, he completed his doctoral dissertation on medieval

trading companies, and, in 1891, he presented his postdoctoral thesis (*Habilitationsschrift*) on Roman agrarian history. This formally qualified him for an academic university position, and he was appointed as a lecturer in law at the University of Berlin. In 1892, he married Marianne Schnitger, a scholarly interlocutor who supported her husband's academic career. After teaching economics at the University of Freiburg, in 1896 Weber accepted an appointment as professor at the University of Heidelberg. He was 32. His contemporaries considered him very young to be appointed professor at such a prestigious German university.

It was at the University of Heidelberg that Weber suffered a nervous breakdown in 1898, and he resigned from the university. His mental illness occurred soon after the death of his father. It is a matter of conjecture whether quarreling with Weber senior caused the mental illness. Shortly before his father died, Max had a violent argument with him, which culminated in his ordering his father from his house. Father and son were never to speak to each other again. On hearing of his father's unexpected death, Max Weber was consumed by guilt and remorse. Unable to concentrate on his academic life, he traveled widely, especially around southern Europe. It was not until 1903, at the age of 39, that he was able to resume his academic career, which provided him with extended sabbaticals. In 1904, while traveling in the United States, he delivered his first lecture in more than six years. It is reported that he was enamored of the US democratic processes and captivated by the pace and mayhem of life in the large cities. Traveling around the United States appeared to have a cathartic effect on Weber, for, on returning to Germany, he produced some of his most important work on methodology, religion, and capitalism. As did Émile Durkheim, Weber contributed to the development of the nascent discipline of sociology. He helped establish the German Society for Sociology, and, in 1903, he accepted a position as associate editor of the prestigious *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Archive for Social Science and Social Policy). His circle of friends included philosopher Georg Lukács, as well as sociologists Robert Michels and Georg Simmel.

Weber wrote more than ten books and numerous scholarly papers on a range of topics, including *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* in 1904 and his best-known work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, during 1904 and 1905. He taught himself Russian and became proficient enough in reading contemporary Russian sources



Photo 10.1. Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Germany, in 1864. In 1892 he married Marianne Schnitger, an academic. Weber's circle of friends included the philosopher Georg Lukács, as well as the sociologists Robert Michels and Georg Simmel. Weber died of pneumonia in 1920, at the age of 56.

to write an article on the 1905 Russian Revolution. World War I interrupted his scholarly productivity. Too old for active service, much to his regret, he worked as a hospital administrator for a short period before serving on an obscure government commission to examine tariff-related problems. After 1916, most of his time was devoted to writing about his lifelong interests: religion, political economy, and society. Shortly thereafter, he published his important studies of world religions: *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (1916), *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (1916), and *The Sociology of Religion* (1921). After the war, he became politically active, joined the newly formed Deutsche Demokratische Partei (German Democratic Party), and was shortlisted as the party's candidate for a Frankfurt constituency. He failed to be nominated and was apparently deeply disappointed by the decision.⁶ For sociology, at least,

his rejection was all to the good because Weber was able to continue working on his major project, the three volumes of *Economy and Society* (published posthumously in 1921). A sociological treatise, it has become an integral part of the sociological imagination.⁷ Weber's publications are clearly many, diverse, and complex, possessing a fragmentary character, which has had the effect of generating a variety of interpretations of his work.⁸

Weber's personality was full of paradoxes. On the one hand, he cultivated a puritan lifestyle, but, on the other hand, he himself gave no sign he was a believer.⁹ Though an academic mandarin, he craved to be a man of action and wrote, "I am not really a scholar; scientific activity is for me primarily an occupation for the leisure hours.... The feeling of being active in a practical way is entirely indispensable to me, and I

hope that the pedagogic side of the teaching profession will satisfy this craving.”¹⁰ This contradiction within Weber’s personality is summed up by Reinhard Bendix: “He continuously engaged in the simultaneous effort to be a man of science with the strenuous vigor more common in a man of action, and to be a man of action with all the ethical rigor and personal detachment more common in a man of science.”¹¹ Though Weber is now recognized as a member of the sociological canon, his work contains paradoxes and ambiguity that have generated multiple and conflicting interpretations. Though he did not have a conception of society as a social system, he famously warned about the “iron cage” of industrial capitalism. His methodological ideas are ambiguous, and grappling with them has been characterized as “handling a bar of wet soap.”¹² Weber died of pneumonia on June 14, 1920, at the age of 56.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Weber’s social theories were shaped by the specific historical context of his time and by several intellectual sources. An appreciation of these contexts is necessary in understanding Weber’s substantive ideas on the methodology of the social sciences and his analysis of the origins and nature of modernity. Weber was writing during a period of profound political and intellectual uncertainty, and his sociology is hollow once divorced from the political context in which it is embedded.¹³ As a member of the German educated middle class, Weber possessed political and cultural values reflective of this social group’s commitment to nationalism, so his work addresses the problem of the economic retardation of Germany and of the country’s position in global politics. In his inaugural address at the University of Freiburg in 1895, Weber emphasized the need for a strong, united Germany. He declared, “The object of our work in social policy is not to make the world happy, but to unify socially a nation surrounded by economic progress.”¹⁴ Following Bismarck’s resignation in 1890, debates on the weakness of the German middle classes, the stifling effect of state bureaucracy, the leadership vacuum, and the perceived external threat of Britain, Russia, and the United States fashioned Weber’s theories on bureaucracy, leadership, and class structure.¹⁵

The influence of Marx's ideas on Weber's intellectual apparatus has been the topic of considerable debate and scholarship. It was the American sociologist Talcott Parsons, in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), who first introduced Weber's work to Anglo-Saxon sociologists. From Parson's interpretation of Weber's oeuvre, it became common parlance that Weber intended *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *The Protestant Ethic*) and *Economy and Society* as a "refutation" of Marx's thesis on capitalism. It is not difficult to support this incorrect view when, for example, Weber refers to "naïve historical materialism."¹⁶ In Marx's conception of history, the change in the economic base – from feudalism to capitalism – had come first, followed by changes in the superstructure, such as variations in religious beliefs. In identifying the influence of religious ideas on the development of capitalism, Weber's analysis in *The Protestant Ethic* appears to reverse the base-structure assumption of Marx. Weber explicitly denies this interpretation: "We have no intention of defending any such foolishly doctrinaire thesis as that the 'capitalist spirit' ... let alone capitalism itself, *could only* arise as a result of certain influences of the Reformation."¹⁷ Weber calls Marx a "great thinker"¹⁸ and acknowledges the importance of a society's economic conditions. One study of Marx and Weber shows that, despite very different political standpoints, their social theory shares a central interest in the dehumanizing effect of industrial capitalism.¹⁹ Thus, both classical theorists reveal a convergence in their critique of capitalism, and there are substantive affinities between Marx and Weber.²⁰ Marx's theory of alienation and Weber's concepts of rationalization and disenchantment, as in the iron cage, for example, exhibit significant similarities.²¹

The hypothesis of the "debate with the ghost of Marx," as an intellectual milieu for understanding Weber's work, has been replaced by the thesis that the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a decisive intellectual influence on Max Weber.²² Nietzsche is acknowledged as the principal philosopher responsible for the dethronement of Enlightenment reason and the celebration of the irrational. According to Nietzsche, people must understand that the social world is replete with ambiguity, absurdity, cruelty, and injustice and that unconscious impulses and strivings dominate human behavior, not rational principles. As a late-modern philosopher, Nietzsche believed that there exist no absolute moral standards whose truth



Photo 10.2. Weber argued that sociologists can understand social action by penetrating to the subjective meanings that humans themselves attach to their own behaviors, a method called *Verstehen*. This contemporary photograph shows a homeless person spending the night in the public space of the metropolis. Weber's methods suggest that researchers cannot understand the homeless, for example, unless they examine how the homeless themselves view and explain their situation.

can be demonstrated by reflective reason: nothing is true. Christianity, said Nietzsche, smothered humans' true essence, the spark of life. In proclaiming that "God is dead" and Christian morality is defunct, Nietzsche believed that traditional moral values had lost their authority and binding power in late-capitalist societies. His writings are riven with contradictions that inspire multiple interpretations, controversy, and conjecture.²³

Nietzsche's philosophy shaped the development of Weber's sociology in several important ways. Like Nietzsche, Weber emphasizes the primacy of power in social life. In *Economy and Society*, Weber writes, "Domination in the most general sense is one of the most important elements of social action."²⁴ Furthermore, Nietzsche's views on the loss

of authority of traditional moral values, with his “God is dead” and his criticism of absolutist notions of truth, profoundly influenced Weber’s ideas about the ability of the social sciences ever to establish, unambiguously, the “truth” in the social world. A legacy of Nietzsche’s philosophy was that truth exists only from a particular standpoint or perspective. Thus, truth is always contingent. There are no metanarratives. Weber’s critical observations on the moral basis of intellectual inquiry and his pessimistic analysis of modern bureaucracy’s capacity to eliminate “love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements”²⁵ can be traced back to Nietzsche.

In addition to Marx and Nietzsche, a third intellectual force influencing Weber’s encyclopedic writings is neo-Kantianism, particularly the works of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915), and Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936). In the 1880s German intellectuals engaged vigorously on the issues of epistemology and methodology in the social sciences. They raised questions about the intellectual authority of the philosophical sciences: whether there is an objective social reality that is accessible to the human mind, and whether social reality is reflected in social theories or “merely constructed by them.”²⁶ Weber himself posed the question of whether the Protestant Reformation was a real historical event or simply a theoretically constructed idea.²⁷ The dispute over the differences between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) initiated what is known as the *Methodenstreit* debate. The argument began when in 1883 Carl Menger published his *Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences*, which was critically reviewed by Gustav Schmoller. In essence, the debate was an expression of dissatisfaction with the dominance of positivist thinking and the crisis in philosophical sciences. Among the German intellectual elite, there was widespread revulsion against positivism; it was considered “a kind of intellectual acid, a potentially disastrous dissolvent of holistic concepts, traditional beliefs, and socially integrative certainties.”²⁸ The neo-Kantian movement aimed to secure the intellectual authority of the humanities and social sciences. The Dilthey-Windelband-Rickert triumvirate addressed two central issues: subject matter and the theory of knowledge. According to Dilthey, the natural sciences and the social sciences studied different objects. He also challenged the secular sobriety of French positivism and instead emphasized humanity’s creative

and meaningful commonality, which was unmasked by hermeneutics approaches, a process of understanding, interpretation, and explanation. In Dilthey's words, "Everything in which the mind has objectified itself contains something held in common between I and thou. Every square planted with trees, every room in which seats are arranged, is intelligible to us from our infancy because human planning, arranging, and valuing – common to all of us – have assigned a place to every square and every object in the room."²⁹ Dilthey's hermeneutics work to understand social life has been described variously as a declaration of war against positivism³⁰ or as a declaration of independence on behalf of humanities.³¹ He never abandoned his conviction that empathy is an element in interpretation, but, in a 1907 essay on descriptive psychology, Dilthey developed the concept of *Verstehen* to capture human meanings from social experience. Georg Simmel articulated aspects of Dilthey's *Verstehen* as early as 1892. Like Dilthey, Simmel emphasized the relationship between inner movements of the soul and their outward manifestations. This point is important because Simmel influenced Weber more directly than Dilthey.³²

By contrast, Wilhelm Windelband held that the subject matter of the human sciences seeks fully to describe a single event in its "unique actuality" at a particular location in time. He argued that, methodologically, the natural sciences pursue nomothetic knowledge (*Gesetz*) in the form of universal laws and the human sciences strive for an ideographic knowledge (*Gestalt*) of single patterns or actions. The younger Rickert refined Windelband's ideas. Heinrich Rickert believed that the principal distinction between the natural and human sciences was between their respective methods. For Rickert, the natural sciences generalize, the human sciences individualize. He also conceived of human cultures as systems of values. Facts, argued Rickert, are constituted out of experience and given form by cognitive activity, which connotes selection and judgment. Rickert's belief was "first we judge and then we know."³³ While the natural sciences explain phenomena in terms of causal arguments, the human sciences are concerned with understanding the significance and importance of cultural phenomena. Thus, both physics and anthropology are sciences, but they require different methods of inquiry. Whereas physics can be studied within the framework of laws and causes, in anthropology the emphasis is with hermeneutics and the problem of how to *Verstehen* – understand, interpret, and make

judgments about – the meaning of ritual acts and customs with reference to values, which are embedded in the cultural context of the researcher.

WEBER AND THE *METHODENSTREIT*

While the genealogy of Weber's methodological essays is complex,³⁴ Nietzsche's philosophy and the neo-Kantian view of concept formation undoubtedly influenced Weber's writings on the methodology of social research. Weber's contribution to the *Methodenstreit* debate was his integration of two different philosophical positions.³⁵ The first is informed by Kant's critique of pure and practical reason: social inquiry and objectivity are dynamically constructed by the researcher through the application of value relevance, ideal types, and plausible causation. The second position is informed by Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism and relativism: "reason has become indifferent to cultural values, moral norms, and political commitment, as well as silent to the possibilities of social critique."³⁶ Weber articulates the conflict between the two different philosophical positions through his use of the terms "value relevance" (*Wertbeziehung*) and "value freedom" (*Wertfreiheit*). According to George McCarthy, "It is this very tension between a philosophy of science based on Kantian constructionalism and Nietzschean nihilism that frames [Weber's] understanding of the *Methodenstreit* debate."³⁷ Weber agreed with the anti-positivists that the application of general laws to study social reality in its totality is problematic. However, Weber argued that rational scientific methods should be applied to the human sciences and should not be reserved exclusively for the natural sciences. Whatever the object under investigation, scientific criteria are always the aspiration; the specificity of the human sciences, the motives and values that guide human inquiry, necessitate special consideration.³⁸

The problem of values, of normative judgments and empirical knowledge, or of truth is addressed in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Weber recognizes that, in the initial research stage, personal and cultural values cannot be exorcized, and, consequently, what is selected for investigation mirrors the researcher's values. However, Weber insists that social science be value-free in the analysis stage. Weber writes,

“An attitude of moral indifference has no connection with *scientific* ‘objectivity.’”³⁹ For Weber, objectivity involves a moral commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, that is, truth. Borrowing from neo-Kantian and Nietzschean philosophy – and rejecting the naturalism of the natural sciences, discarding universal laws, and theorizing about value relevance and causality – Weber “ultimately concludes with a theory of value freedom as a freedom from the values of positivism and metaphysics of rationalization.”⁴⁰ For Weber, objectivity in social science research and scholarship demands “the insistence on the rigorous distinction between empirical knowledge and value-judgements.”⁴¹ For many years, Weber’s position on objectivity has been widely misinterpreted to mean value freedom (*Wertfreiheit*), implying a simple objectivity that requires researchers to free themselves of all values in the course of their research. Weber intended the term *objectivity* to mean that researchers have an obligation to be aware of the ideologies and values that dominate their own perspectives and observations and to strive to go beyond their own individual views. The meaning of Weber’s distinction between value freedom and value relevance is found in the following quotation:

[T]he problems of the social sciences are selected by the value-relevance of the phenomena treated.... [T]he expression “relevance of values” refers simply to the philosophical interpretation of that specifically scientific “interest” which determines the selection of a given subject-matter and the problems of an empirical analysis.... [T]ogether with historical experience, cultural (i.e., evaluative) interests give purely empirical scientific work its direction....

[W]ithout the investigator’s evaluative ideas, there would be no principle of selection of subject-matter and no meaningful knowledge of the concrete reality. Just as without the investigator’s conviction regarding the significance of particular cultural facts, every attempt to analyze concrete reality is absolutely meaningless, so the direction of his personal belief, the refraction of values in the prism of his mind, gives direction to his work.⁴²

Thus, Weber emphasizes that human inquiry involves moral choices, and the implication is that sociologists need to explain the moral choices that they make.⁴³ Like Rickert, Weber conceived of culture as a value

concept. This quotation is typical of his argument: “The *significance* of a configuration of cultural phenomena and the basis of this significance cannot ... be derived and rendered intelligible by a system of analytical laws ... since the significance of cultural events presupposes a value-orientation towards these events.”⁴⁴ The social scientist must abstract sufficiently unambiguous conceptualizations from the infinite complexity of social reality. But what is the criterion by which a segment of social life is selected for investigation? Weber, influenced by Rickert, formulates what he believes to be the decisive feature of social sciences methodology, the principle of *value orientation*. Social sciences analyze segments of social action in terms of their *significance*; but importantly, these are only the segments that have become significant to the scientist because of their value relevance. As Weber writes,

Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values. Only because and to the extent that this is the case is it worthwhile for us to know it in its individual features.... The focus of attention on reality under the *guidance of values* which lend it significance and the selection and ordering of the phenomena ... is entirely different from the analysis of reality in terms of laws and general concepts.⁴⁵

Weber argues that, given the infinite variety of empirical reality, only a chaos of judgment would result from any serious attempt to analyze segments of social reality “without presuppositions.” For instance, a Canadian researcher investigating the social barriers facing young women entering higher education may assume there is a potential connection between social class and university access. On the other hand, a social scientist is likely to have a different presupposition if the same study is conducted in Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country. Weber’s position is clear: what is deemed meaningful is a cultural construct. As Weber states,

A chaos of “existential judgments” about countless individual events would be the only result of a serious attempt to analyze reality “without presuppositions.” And even this result is only seemingly

possible, since every single perception discloses on closer examination an infinite number of constituent perceptions, which can never be exhaustively expressed in a judgement. Order is brought into this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a *part* of concrete reality is interesting and *significant* to us, because only it is related to the *cultural values* with which we approach reality.⁴⁶

For Weber as for Rickert, in the human sciences, judgments of relevance and meaning will be developed with reference to cultural values. Further, where the uniqueness of a social phenomenon is concerned, causality is not a matter of abstract general laws but of specific, concrete, causal relationships. For Weber, an objective analysis of social reality that proceeds according to the ideal of laws is meaningless.⁴⁷ Weber's preoccupation with such topics as ethical neutrality in teaching and objectivity in social inquiry was driven by the practical circumstances related to academic freedom in Germany's universities and inspired by Nietzsche's critique of the Enlightenment's absolutist notions of truth. Weber accepted Nietzsche's argument that truth is always contingent upon the perspectives of the inquiring scholar. If God is dead, the "freedom" of a social science means that there is no grounding by which any one perspective could have legitimacy over other perspectives. Weber's deliberations on the problem of objectivity in the social sciences, and particularly on the problem of understanding human action, were attempts to address this issue of legitimacy.⁴⁸

DEFINITION OF SOCIOLOGY AND METHODOLOGIES

The *Methodenstreit* controversy underpins Weberian sociology. In *Economy and Society*, Weber refers to the science of society as interpretive sociology (*Verstehend Soziologie*), and he defines sociology as "a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequence."⁴⁹ Sociology is concerned with investigating social action, which includes both the failure to act and a passive acquiescence that may be oriented to the past, present, or future behavior of others. However, not every kind of human action is social action. Here, Weber makes a distinction between behavior and action. Behavior is an observable act

or movement that humans do without attaching a meaning to it. For example, if a person coughs or faints, the act can be understood as the result of a physical cause rather than meaningful action.

Social Action

Sociology investigates meaningful social action or reaction, whether meaning is attributed to the actions of a single individual; to those prevailing, on average, within a particular group; or to those attributed to a hypothetically constructed, typical actor.⁵⁰ Weber's well-known definition of *social action* states: "The acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission, or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course."⁵¹ This definition makes a distinction in that sociology is concerned only with meaningful *social* action that is affected by or oriented toward others. The example Weber uses to show this distinction is an accident between two cyclists. The collision may be looked at as a natural event, a result of a causal chain of physical events: although the cyclists are engaged in meaningful action, neither intended the collision to occur. On the other hand, if an altercation or an apology follows the collision, either would constitute meaningful social action in which an individual is directing her or his action toward the other. Weber also insists that actions conditioned by crowd psychology or the imitation of the action of others do not constitute social action. Weber's theorizing of human action is significantly different to that of Marx or Durkheim. For Marx, economic forces, of which people often have little or no understanding and to which they do not attribute a subjective meaning, constantly affect human action. For Durkheim, the notion of social consciousness implies that meaning itself is socially constructed: people are socialized into ways of thinking. Weber's meaningful social action might be described as norm-following, and, by definition, norms reflect or embody a culture's values and are always backed by sanctions of one kind or another: norms are cultural constructs.

Weber identifies four types of social action: traditional, affectual, value-rational, and instrumentally rational. *Traditional action* is rooted in a body of cultural beliefs, customary habits of thought, and practices, which produce almost automatic action following habitual stimuli, as,

for example, with showering, eating, walking, or a priest following church doctrine. The great mass of everyday action approaches this type of action and is on a borderline between presocial (nonreflective) and social (meaningful). *Affectual* action is designed to capture the diverse emotional states of individuals by means of empathy. Such empathy is easier, writes Weber, “the more we ourselves are susceptible to such emotional reactions as anxiety, anger, ambition, envy, jealousy, love, enthusiasm, pride, vengefulness, loyalty, devotion, and appetites of all sorts, and to the ‘irrational’ conduct which grows out of them.”⁵² This type of action is also on the borderline of what can be considered meaningfully oriented action, for it is not primarily goal directed. An example might be an individual leaping with joy during a religious service.

Value-rational action (*Wertrational*) is anchored in a conscious belief in the ultimate value of achieving some substantive goal (e.g., salvation) by calculated – rational – means (e.g., pursuing an ascetic lifestyle). Value-rational actions are those of individuals who, regardless of personal cost, put their convictions into practice to do what seems to them to be required because of a religious call, personal loyalty, duty, or the importance of some cause. An example would be Martin Luther King Jr., who strove for racial equality in the United States in the 1960s but who advocated nonviolent means of achieving the movement’s goal. *Instrumentally rational action* (*Zweckrational*) considers the ends, the means, and the secondary outcomes; in this form of social action, the goals themselves have also been rationally chosen. This type of action is the most rational and, in Weber’s words, is determined by “expectations as to the behaviour 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.”⁵³ Instrumentally rational action involves calculated consideration of alternative means to the end, of the relations of the end to the secondary consequences, and of the relative importance of different possible ends. Weber’s typology is an abstraction, and actual social action, as in the case of the actions of the ascetic Protestant sects described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is likely to involve all four types – that is, nonrational (traditional and affective types) and rational (value and instrumental types) – in different degrees.⁵⁴

The significance of Weber’s interest in legal philosophy is seldom factored into his methodological writings. In German civil law cases,

the problem facing legal experts is that they must attribute effects to causes in particular circumstances and thus engage in the doctrine of singular causal analysis. For example, in assessing the role of negligence in an accident, legal opinion compares the sequence of events or actions that actually occurred with what could have been expected if normal caution or action had prevailed. According to Weber, sociology is concerned with causal explanation of social action, and his suggested method relies heavily upon the doctrine of singular causal analysis.⁵⁵ In his essay “Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences,” Weber examines the methodological foundations of singular causal claims. He writes, “For the meaning of history as a *science of reality* can only be that it treats particular elements of reality not merely as heuristic *instruments* but as *objects* of knowledge, and particular causal connections not as premises of knowledge but as *real* causal factors.”⁵⁶ The social scientist has to exclude the reproduction of the totality of concrete conditions in order to conceptually isolate complex antecedent conditions that more or less favor the outcome to be explained. Therefore, to achieve adequate causation, the *judgments of possibility* – that is, propositions regarding what *would* happen in the event of the exclusion of certain conditions – are “a matter of isolation and generalization” and involve “the continuous reference to empirical rules [*Erfahrungsregeln*].”⁵⁷ Weber writes, “The ‘knowledge’ on which such a judgement of ... ‘significance’ rests is ... on the one hand, knowledge of certain ‘facts’ (‘ontological’ knowledge), ‘belonging’ to the ‘historical situation’ ... and on the other ... knowledge of certain known empirical rules, particularly those relating to the ways in which human beings are prone to react under given situations (‘nomological knowledge’).”⁵⁸ Weber’s formulation of the causal explanation of varieties of social action is a representation of causal relationships that deals in *trajectories* of actions and in the divergences between trajectories and outcomes. Weber’s creative reformulation and application of singular causal analysis set him apart from other participants in the *Methodenstreit* debate.

Understanding Social Action

According to Weber’s definition, sociology concerns itself with the subjective meaning of social action. But what does Weber mean by the term *subjective*? How do sociologists truly grasp meaningful social action?

Developing the work of hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, Weber argues that social scientists can understand (*Verstehen*) types of social action by penetrating to those subjective meanings that humans attach to their own actions and to the action of others. Whereas the natural sciences examine the *outer states* of the natural world, the human sciences are concerned with the interpretation of the subjective *inner states* of actors. All interpretations of meaning, argues Weber, “strive for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension.”⁵⁹ However, because social actions range from the highly rational to the highly emotional, the basis for accuracy in understanding may be rational, emotional, empathic, or artistically appreciative. Accordingly, Weber is amenable to using two types of understanding: direct and explanatory. Table 10.1 indicates the relationship Weber sees between the types of understanding and the types of evidence. He focuses primarily on explanatory (rational) understanding. Types I and II represent *direct understanding*, which involves comprehending the meaning of an action by virtue of the physical or symbolic characteristic of the act, such as observing that certain facial or body movements indicate anger, boredom, and so forth. These are understandings in which the directly observable evidence is sufficient to establish an interpretation, such as why someone moves her hand away from a hot stove or chops wood for winter fuel.

Weber’s own example of direct understanding is the Pythagorean theorem in reasoning and the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$. Types III and IV represent *explanatory understanding*, which entails comprehending the meaningful connection between an action and the likely reasons and motives underlying that act. For example, chopping wood may be part of a fitness routine for a person in a sedentary occupation, or it may be a therapeutic exercise if a person is angry after a quarrel with his or her boss. For Weber, the fact that an interpretation cannot be derived directly from the action observed and empathized with suggests that, for valid knowledge of individual subjective motives, some method is required that involves assessing interpretative hypotheses as causes. Weber writes that the method of explanatory understanding is “not normative correctness, but rather, on the one hand, the conventional habits of the investigator ... in thinking in a particular way, and on the other, as the situation requires, his capacity to ‘feel himself’ empathically into a mode of thought which deviates from his own and which is normatively

Table 10.1. Types of understanding and evidence

Type of understanding	Type of evidence	
	Intuitive	Rational
Direct	I	II
Explanatory	III	IV

Source: Adapted from Sven Eliaeson, *Max Weber's Methodologies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 42.

‘false’ according to his own habits of thought.”⁶⁰ Explanatory understanding requires the investigator to engage in a mode of thought that is sensitive to the context in which the researched and the researcher are located. For example, if we were informed of a statistical correlation between the numbers of students attending university and the polar bear population, we would regard the causal relationship as meaningless. On the other hand, if we were informed of a correlation between the numbers of students attending university and family income, we would likely consider the causal connection plausible. Why? Because we are members of the society that generated the data, we have experience of tuition fees, and we can follow the likely motives and reasoning underlying the social action. Explanatory understanding differs from direct understanding in that it requires more intellectual effort, it strives to understand social action within a context on the basis of the relevant facts and experiences, and it involves judgment. For Weber, interpretive sociology accomplishes something that is never attainable in the natural sciences: the capacity to confer intelligibility on the social action of the component individuals.

Ideal Type as a Logical Construct

Weber’s methodology is primarily about conceptualization and the challenge of generating meaningful selections from an infinite and multifarious reality. In order to strive for scientific precision on the meaning of social phenomena and to arrive at a *causal explanation* of observed reality, Weber developed his *ideal type*, defined as a “one-sided emphasis and intensification of one or several aspects of a given event.”⁶¹ The concept is borrowed from neoclassical economic theory. In empirical research, the ideal type has only one function: “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.”⁶² An ideal type is not a description of reality; neither is it an average of something nor a normative exemplar to be achieved. Ideal types are logical hypothetical constructs. Weber’s conception of the ideal type is central to his method because it simplifies the multiple complexes of social reality: “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 [*Gedankenbild*]. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia*.”⁶³ The more precisely an ideal type is constructed, that is, the more abstract it is, the better it can perform its function in formulating terminology and potentially useful hypotheses. Ideal types are indispensable as cognitive means to the extent that they lead to knowledge of concrete social phenomena in their interrelatedness, their causes, and their significance.⁶⁴ Ideal types also possess substantial heuristic as well as expository value. In that they are constructed to project a hypothetical *progression* of observable action that *could* be explained in terms of understandable motives, ideal types are an integral part of Weber’s triadic model of singular causal analysis. In the analysis of *real* social action, ideal-type projections become the basis for the causal ascription of deviations from the rationally understandable progression of actions. A diagrammatic representation of ideal-type analysis is shown in [figure 10.1](#).

The line A–B represents the external progression of rational actions that would have occurred if the individual had acted as specified in the ideal type. The line A1–B1 is the actual progression of actions observed by the investigator. The positing of the ideal type allows the investigator to compare A1–B1 with A–B and thus “quantify” the deviation B–B1 that must be attributed causally to the difference between A, the “motives” hypothetically ascribed to the ideal, typical individual, and A1, the “motivation” of the actual individual or individuals studied. For example, in a pure ideal-type form, bureaucracy has certain traits, such as its performance of specialized tasks, continuity, formal procedures

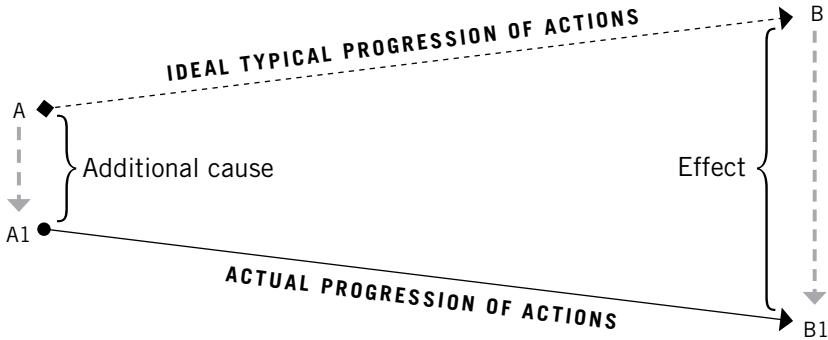


Figure 10.1. Weber's ideal-type analysis of social phenomena

and rules, clarity, strict subordination, unified control, the allocation of positions on the basis of technical qualifications, and a defined hierarchy. Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy is compared with the observed conduct or processes of a bureaucratic organization.

A problem faces the researcher, though: How do we know we have constructed an ideal-type conception of the social phenomena we wish to study? Weber's criterion for evaluating the usefulness of an ideal type is matter of fact. Weber notes in his canonical text, "*Theory-construction can never be decided *a priori*. There is only one criterion, namely, that of success in revealing concrete cultural phenomena in their interdependence, their causal conditions and their *significance*. The construction of abstract ideal-types recommends itself not as an end but as a *means*."*

⁶⁵ Examples of what Weber means by ideal-type constructs include Marx's capitalist modes of production, Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity, Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, as well as Weber's own typology of social action. Ideal types can also be constructed for developmental stages, such as feudalism, or historical particularities, such as the industrial city. As Weber posits, "all specifically Marxian 'laws' and developmental constructs – insofar as they are theoretically sound – are ideal types."⁶⁶ For Weber, the construction of ideal types has three main functions in social theorizing: they help to conceptualize the multifarious mosaic that is social life in modernity, they help to formulate empirical research questions and *suggest* potential causal relationships, and they underscore the active role of the researcher in the interpretation of social action.

CRITICISM

There have been several criticisms of Weber's methodology.⁶⁷ The first criticism is that he never philosophically justifies pivoting from his early neo-Kantian approach, as a sociology of culture and historical understanding, to his later approach to social inquiry. In his later writings, Weber develops a method of interpretative explanation in terms of instrumental rationality, natural causality, and an apparent positivist methodology. As McCarthy observes, "The tension between an interpretative science of subjective meaning, causal adequacy, objective possibility, and ideal types are never reconciled with an explanatory science of statistical probabilities ... hypotheses, and empirical verification."⁶⁸ The second, more specific, criticism questions the fact-value dichotomy and the notion of value neutrality. Weber's position is criticized on the grounds that since human science operates within a moral universe, it is naïve to believe that it can avoid moral judgment of its data; moreover, in conditions of "irrational power politics" (e.g., fascism), so-called impartiality may be an abdication of responsibility. The third criticism relates to Weber's ideal types, which, critics argue, are located in the context of asymmetrical power relations. For feminists, a critical issue is the relationship of women to the process of power. Weber's key methodological tool occurs in the context of a "natural inequality" between the sexes. Although Weber posits that all knowledge of social reality is always knowledge from particular standpoints, when he actually applies his concept of power to forms of domination, it is obvious that he regards men's access to power and male domination as natural and inevitable. A contemporary iconoclastic feminist affirms that the "ideal type patriarchy assumes that the domination of women is a 'natural' phenomenon."⁶⁹ The fourth criticism relates to his conception of instrumental rational social action as limited to a relationship between means and ends, with each step leading on to the next in a linear fashion, until the desired end is achieved. Critics consider this conception of rationality as one that is more concerned with domination: the control and exploitation of the natural world.⁷⁰

The fifth criticism relates to Weber's approach to understanding, *Verstehen*. Even though *Verstehen* calls for the investigator to be perceptive of meaningful connections between actions and context, it

creates only causal hypotheses that do not constitute knowledge per se, however plausible an interpretation may appear. In other words, the validity of the relationship needs to be established empirically. Another critique relates to relativism, which is raised by the notion of interpretation. For Weber, the meaning of any social action is deeply embedded in its cultural context. This argument appears to be relatively clear, but, if meaning is specific to the local, how is any *general* knowledge of society as such possible? If, for example, the strategies of multinational companies have to be interpreted within the context of national spaces and values, can there be a universally relevant sociology of work? Finally, Weber's notorious typology has been critiqued because it poses problems of validation, which Weber attempted to resolve with judgments of plausibility and empirical evidence. As others have pointed out, this approach raises questions. How does the researcher know that the central traits of a social phenomenon have been thoroughly abstracted from reality? And, once an ideal type has been abstracted, how much deviation from it is scientifically acceptable before the researcher must conclude that it bears too little resemblance to social reality to be useful? Although the ideal type was central to his sociological work, Weber was never able to provide a satisfactory definition of the ideal-type rational social action. His quest for objective social science and his extreme form of constructivism, critics argue, reflects his "ontological insecurity," which is rooted in his pessimistic view of humans in modernity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Weber made an immense contribution to social research discourse. Neo-Kantian thinkers such as Nietzsche, Dilthey, Simmel, Windelband, and Rickert heavily influenced his writings. Weber extended the *Methodenstreit* debate in several important ways by emphasizing that the subject matter of the social sciences was made up of individuals whose social action was based on values; that, in both natural and social sciences, facts never speak for themselves, they require interpretation; and that research methods are always shaped by the

researcher's cultural values and ideologies. Weber's value-freedom/value-relevance dichotomy, as well as his use of singular causal analysis, his theory of social action, his application of *Verstehen* as a distinct mode of understanding, and his account of the nature and purpose of ideal-type constructs are among his central conceptual and procedural contributions to methodology. Weber laid the foundations for the furtherance of testable procedures in social research. Weber's essays, charting the boundary between judgments and epistemological neutrality, have been given canonical status in most introductory texts on social research methods.⁷¹

What emerges from Weber's work on social inquiry is that historical understanding is always interpretative, and his methods foreshadow postmodernist thinking, in particular the multiple challenges to metanarratives. Moreover, his methodological legacy still provides researchers with concepts and practices, and a deep appreciation of the problem of values and meaning in research. Weber's stature as a classical sociologist affirms his own argument that science does not stand outside ideology. Talcott Parsons misinterpreted Weber's *Protestant Ethic* and the methodological *Essays* as a refutation of Marx's thesis on capitalism and as a support for "value-free" research. And the context that shaped this theoretical interpretation of Weber's work was global politics that eventuated in the Cold War. While the central metaphor for much of modern human inquiry is the crystal – with its infinite variety of shapes, patterns, colors, and transmutations – rather than the ideal type, in the era of post-truth – disputes over public truth claims, in which facts are viewed as irrelevant – and "fake news" discourses, Weber's thoughts on objectivity and meaning seem highly relevant.⁷²

Finally, American sociological theory has increasingly focused on the relation of culture to human action with an emphasis on culture's "autonomy" or "independent effects." And, in this intellectual milieu, it's a reflection of his legacy that Weber is considered a central figure in current American sociology. Indeed, recent Weberian scholarship posits that Weber's account of values is "less subjectivist than hitherto supposed," suggesting that culture orients action and cognition in different ways.⁷³

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 “In both natural and social sciences facts never speak for themselves, they require interpretation.” Explain Weber’s assertion.
- 2 What is your understanding of the concept of *Verstehen*?
- 3 What does Weber mean by “ideal types” and what purpose do they serve in social inquiry?

11

Max Weber: Capitalism and Rationalization

It is said that to understand modernity is to understand Weber.¹ Yet, though there have been several forays into Weber's writings with the purpose of discovering a thematic unity, scholars widely acknowledge that it is difficult to impose a single unifying theme on his work. The quest for an organizing theme has been complicated by problems connected to the transmission of his ideas through translation, publication, and fragmentation.² Much contemporary Anglo-Saxon Weberian scholarship argues that Weber's analysis of modernity centers on the primacy of rational cost-benefit structure and the process of rationalization that allows individuals to act in reference to their future aims, not their past habits. Weber used the term *rationalization* to describe a set of interrelated social processes by which nature, individuals, culture, and institutions have been systematically transformed by rational human action. Like his writings on methodology, Weber's critique of capitalism was fashioned from many intellectual sources. A number of translated texts have tended to be identified as constituting the core of Weber's sociological writings. Prominent among these are his best-known and influential work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *The Protestant Ethic*), and the assortment of manuscripts posthumously published under the title *Economy and Society*. His writings are ambiguous, fragmented, and full of paradoxes. He famously warned about the "Iron Cage" of modernity – meaning living with a feeling of being trapped.

The aim of this chapter is to elucidate Weber's social theorizing on the connections between capitalism and religious beliefs, his idea of Western rationalization, and his ambivalent evaluation of modernity. In so doing, we shall identify some major differences between Marx and Weber.

RATIONALIZATION THESIS

An overarching theme in Weber's social theory is the concept of rationalization. The term appears repeatedly in *The Protestant Ethic* and in *Economy and Society*, but the most extensive treatment of the concept appears in his *Sociology of Religion*.³ Whether the rationalization thesis is Weber's pivotal theoretical core or whether it is one of several crucial concepts he used to analyze modern life is a matter of protracted debate.⁴ Challenging the orthodox reading of Weber, Wilhelm Hennis, for example, argues that Weber's "central question" (*Fragestellung*) is a concern with the nexus between forms of life conduct (*Lebensführung*), the ways in which individuals attempt to give meaning to their lives, and the universal constraints imposed by the differential distribution of power.⁵ Attempts at a "correct" reading of Weber to explain or reject his rationalization thesis are not helped by the ambiguity and inconsistency in his technical use of the term. However, no complete understanding of Weber's sociology is possible without examining this important concept. Weber sees a systematic process of rationalization underlying Western industrial capitalism. The term is complex and multifaceted, but, at the risk of oversimplification, *rationalization* describes a constellation of ubiquitous interrelated processes that systematically transformed Western European societies by a long-run tendency to bring order and perfection to what, in its "natural" state, is less ordered and imperfect. The following passage by a Weber scholar offers a lucid picture of Weberian rationalization:

Weber's rationalization is ... the product of scientific specialization and technical differentiation peculiar to Western culture ... sometimes associated ... with the notion of intellectualization. It might be defined as the *organization of life through a division and coordination of activities on the basis of an exact study of men's*

relations with each other, with their tools and their environment, for the purpose of achieving greater efficiency and productivity. Hence it is a purely practical development brought about by man's technological genius.

Weber also described rationalization as a striving for perfection ... as an ingenious refinement of the conduct of life and the attainment of increasing mastery over the external world.... [H]e analyzed its evolution in all major branches of human activity – religion, law, art, science, politics, and economics – while being careful not to go beyond the limits of what is objectively ascertainable.⁶

The essence of the concept consists of three facets: secularization, calculability, and rational action. The process of rationalization involved the decline of magical interpretations and explanations of the world, the decreasing authority of the church, the erosion of the social status of the clergy, and the general secularization of the modern world. The tsunami of rational calculation in all spheres of life has created the phenomenon that Weber identified as the *disenchantment* or *de-enchantment* of modernity. What he meant by these terms is a process by which enchantment becomes expunged from everyday life through a progressive loss of faith in the invisible but enchanted shapers of the human theater, in the magical or divine presences provided by folk beliefs as well as by organized religions.⁷ The regimented forms of thought and social action had, for Weber, virtually replaced religion as the unquestioned, motivating creed across much of Western civilization.⁸ Within the legal system, rationalization involves the decline and erosion of ad hoc legal decision making in favor of law making, such that, “in both substantive and procedural matters, only unambiguous general characteristics of the facts of the case are taken into account.”⁹ In the political sphere, rationalization is associated with the decline of traditional domination and the rise of legal-rational systems of authority. Rationalization in the sphere of human labor involves the explicit, systematic design of paid work from the point of view of quantification, efficiency, predictability, and profitability. The notion of timed labor epitomizes Weber's conceptualization of quantification as a form of rationalized control that threatens labor autonomy. Henry Ford, a contemporary of Weber, explains modern factory work and the precise quantification of time to perform routine production tasks like this: “The idea [is] that man must have every second

necessary but not a single unnecessary second.”¹⁰ In social terms, generally, rationalization involves the extension of scientific rationality to the conduct of social life itself, including modern systems of surveillance and the rise of bureaucratic forms of administration.

Weber’s rationalization thesis is closely interlinked with his notion of rationality, which occupies a central place in *Economy and Society*. Rational action is differentiated from other forms of social action. The former involves submitting social action to constant calculative scrutiny by weighing up the means and ends prior to action, which produces a continuous drive toward change. In his writings, Weber identifies four types of rationality: practical, theoretical, formal, and substantive.¹¹ *Practical rationality* assumes no external mystical causes affecting the outcome of human actions and sees reality in terms of what is given. *Theoretical* or *technical rationality* involves a cognitive effort to master the world through causality and logical deduction and induction. This type of rationality allows individuals to understand the meaning of life by means of abstract concepts and conceptual reasoning. *Formal rationality* refers to the application of technically appropriate modes of calculation (means) that go into decisions to ensure consistency of outcome and efficiency in attaining specific goals (ends). *Substantive rationality* refers to the degree to which human action is guided or shaped by a value system regardless of the outcome of the action. Accordingly, formal rationality involves a practical orientation of social action in relation to goals or ends, and substantive rationality involves an orientation to values.

RELIGION AND CAPITALISM

Marx, Durkheim, and Weber studied religion, and they are in some ways compatible in their respective conceptions of it. Marx believed that religion has ideological implications that serve to justify social inequality. Durkheim emphasizes the role of religion in supporting social cohesion. Weber’s study of the “economic ethics” of major world religions examines the link between religion and cultural development. His theory insinuates that a capitalist requires a prior socialization into the appropriate value system, which makes the spread of capitalism dependent on a prior cultural orientation suitable to its economic logic.

If we frame Weber's theory in terms of Marx's base and superstructure schema (see [figure 5.1](#)), the direction of influence and emphasis is reversed. Rather than emphasizing how class relations at the base influence an institution (namely religion), Weber's analysis calls attention to how religion affects the dynamics of class relations at the base. Weber notes, "To the natural uncertainties and resistances facing every innovator, religion adds powerful impediments of its own. The sacred is the uniquely unalterable."¹² His study of Chinese religion identifies the importance of the ancestor as an impediment to rationalism. Weber's study of Hinduism and Buddhism refers to a "magical garden" from which rationality could not develop.¹³ Weber emphasizes the affinities between Judaism and Puritanism.¹⁴ In Western Europe, some sects of Protestantism did prove to be amenable to rational capitalism, to be alterable, which brings us to Weber's classic work on the Protestant ethic.

In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber aims to discern the significance of ascetic Protestantism—in relation to other formative elements of culture—to the growth of modern capitalism in the West and to illustrate the process by which ideas become a force for social change.

The task before us is rather to indicate the significance ... of ascetic rationalism for the content of the *ethic* of the *social* economy, that is, for the type of organization and the functions of social communities, from the conventicle to the state. Then its relationship to humanist rationalism and its ideals and cultural influences, to the development of philosophical and scientific empiricism, and to technological development and the arts must be analyzed.... [I]t must be shown in what way Protestant asceticism itself was influenced in its growth and character by the totality of the cultural, and especially *economic*, conditions of society.¹⁵

As we have seen, Weber asserts that a high degree of formal rationality characterizes capitalism as a modern phenomenon and that the process of rationalization affects all dimensions of social life. Weber's thesis, in brief, proposes that a new attitude to work and the pursuit of wealth, in which work becomes a means of demonstrating godliness, was linked to the rise of Calvinism and that this cultural shift was associated with the rise of *rational* capitalism.

Weber's investigation begins by focusing on the significant cultural differences between European Protestants and Catholics. Comparing the two denominations, he posits that Catholic school students, unlike Protestant, were averse to studying commerce, which, he argues, helps explain "the low participation rate of Catholics in capitalist business life."¹⁶ Further, Protestant skilled workers tended to migrate to the new factories where they formed the "upper echelons of skilled workers and management," whereas Catholic journeymen showed a "greater inclination to remain in craft work."¹⁷ Weber held that "the choice of occupation and future career has undoubtedly been determined by the distinct *mental characteristics* which have been instilled in them."¹⁸

A surface-level comparison of Protestantism and Catholicism might conclude that the latter induces its followers to an ascetic lifestyle while the former, by secularizing every dimension of life, induces its followers to a hedonistic lifestyle. To illustrate this perception, Weber cites a popular adage: "Protestants like to eat well, while Catholics want to sleep well."¹⁹

Weber held that, on the contrary, this is not the case. The English, Dutch, and American Puritans were characterized by "the very opposite of enjoyment of life," argues Weber.²⁰ Indeed, Weber contends that Protestants had an "inner affinity" toward an ascetic lifestyle that made them especially receptive to the rational capitalist culture.

To support his elusive principal thesis – the ideal type – Weber extensively quotes Benjamin Franklin (1706–90), who, although no Calvinist, personified the new capitalist ethos. Franklin, an eighteenth-century self-taught business guru, is important to Weber's thesis because Franklin's writings emphasize the link between religiosity and entrepreneurship.²¹ Franklin enumerates what Weber regards as the ideal-type "spirit" of capitalism:

Remember, that *time is money*. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon *that* the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides.

Remember, that *credit is money*. If a man lets his money lie in my hands after it is due, he gives me the interest, or so much as I can make of it during that time.

Remember, that money is the *prolific, generating nature*. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on.

Remember this saying, *the good paymaster* is lord of another man's purse. He that is known to pay punctually and exactly to the time he promises, may at any time, and on any occasion, raise all the money his friends can spare. This is sometimes of great use.

The most trifling actions that affect a man's credit are to be regarded. The sound of your hammer at five in the morning, or eight at night, heard by the creditor, makes him easy six months longer, but if he sees you at a billiard table, or hears your voice at the tavern, when you should be at work, he sends for his money the next day ... It shows, besides, that you are mindful of what you owe; it makes you appear a careful as well as an *honest* man, and that still increases your *credit*.²²

For Weber, the importance of Franklin's mantra is the notion that the individual has a *duty* to accumulate wealth, which is assumed to be an end in itself. Franklin also acknowledges that this spirit is more than a case of purely "egocentric maxims"; the actions constitute a religious conviction and search for salvation. Here is Weber's summation of Benjamin Franklin's words:

[T]he "*summum bonum*" [great good] of this "ethic" is the *making of money* and yet more money, coupled with a strict avoidance of all uninhibited enjoyment. Indeed, it is so completely devoid of all eudaemonistic, let alone hedonist, motives, so much purely thought of as an end *in itself* that it appears as something wholly transcendent and irrational, beyond the "happiness" or the "benefit" of the *individual*. The aim of a man's life is indeed money making, but this is no longer merely the means to the end of satisfying the material needs of life. This reversal ... of what we might call the "natural" state of affairs is a definite leitmotiv of capitalism, although it will always be alien to anyone who is untouched by capitalism's aura.²³

Whereas Marx understood the same phenomenon in terms of the subordination of "use-value" to "exchange-value," capital accumulation, and a change in the relations of production, Weber understood it as resulting from a change in ethical orientation toward the world.²⁴

Weber explains that Calvinism as such did not foster the capitalist spirit; rather, it was Calvin's followers and the doctrine of predestination that infused the social ethic of capitalist culture. But Catholics, according to Weber, believed they could secure their place in heaven through, among other things, good works on behalf of the poor or by performing acts of faith on earth. For example, the premodern Christian interpretation of the sermon "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"²⁵ made the renunciation of wealth for the sake of the poor a primary condition of avoiding being "cast into hell." On the other hand, Weber asserted that Calvinism had developed a set of beliefs around the concept of predestination that broke the hold of tradition. Followers of Calvinism came to believe that their predestined future left them with no means of knowing or altering their ultimate destination. This uncertainty led anxious Calvinists to search for signs from God that they were among the "elect" to have a place in heaven. Wealth was taken as a manifestation of being among God's elect, thereby encouraging believers to apply themselves rationally to acquire wealth through their ascetic lifestyles. Thus, Protestant preaching stressed that followers had "a duty to *regard* themselves as elect, and to dismiss any doubts as a temptation from the devil.... The exhortation of the apostle to 'make one's own calling sure' was interpreted as a duty to strive for the subjective certainty of one's election and justification in daily struggle.... And ... *tireless labor in a calling* was urged as the best possible means of *attaining* this self-assurance. This and this alone would drive away religious doubt and give assurance to one's state of grace."²⁶

According to Weber, this set of beliefs led to the emergence of what he calls an "ethic of inner conviction" (*Gesinnungsethik*) in which the external observance of holy law is displaced by a more dynamic and intense cultivation of an inner religious state.²⁷ Herein lies the ultimate source of ascetic Protestantism's social-transforming potency:

Wherever the power of the Puritan philosophy of life extended, it always benefited the tendency toward a middle-class [*bürgerlich*], economically *rational* conduct of life, of which it was the most significant and only consistent support. This is, of course, far more important than merely encouraging the formation of capital. *It stood at the cradle of modern "economic man."*²⁸

Weber recognized that asceticism provided a religious legitimacy for the exploitation of human labor. A look at the textual evidence supports this point of view: “Protestant asceticism ... did add tremendous depth to the view and created the psychological *drive* for this norm to achieve its effect by interpreting such work as a *calling*, and as the *sole* means of making sure of one’s state of grace. It also legalized the exploitation of this characteristic willingness to work by interpreting the employer’s moneymaking as a ‘calling’ too.”²⁹ Protestant asceticism transformed the world when it “moved out of the monastic cells and into working life, and began to dominate inner worldly morality,” writes Weber. And in a prophetic observation, he speculates that “this mighty cosmos determines ... the style of life not only of those directly involved in business but every individual who is born into this mechanism, and may well continue to do so *until the day that the last ton of fossil fuel is consumed*.”³⁰ Although Weber did not believe Calvinism was *the* cause of the transformation of society, he did believe rational capitalism, in part, grew from Calvinism. In contrast to Marx, Weber argues that the growth of Western capitalism cannot be explained through wholly material and structural forces: it was embedded in the process of rationalization. The Protestant ethic thesis is often incorrectly interpreted as a refutation of Marx, but, as we explained in [chapter 9](#), this debate has become passé, archaic, and discredited.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN CAPITALISM

In Weber’s view, there is nothing capitalistic in the pursuit of profit or financial gain; both have been sought in many different ways and in all parts of the world. What defines modern Western capitalism is the striving for *profit*, in the course of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise, for *more and more* profits, and for “profitability.”³¹ Weber goes on to define a capitalist act as one which “rests upon the expectation of profit through the exploitation of opportunities for *exchange*, that is, on (formally) *peaceful* opportunities for acquisition.”³² In the new capitalistic order, where capitalist acquisition is rationally pursued, an enterprise has to take advantage of its opportunities for making profit in the market or face extinction, and decisions are made according to the “*calculation* of capital,” with modern bookkeeping methods as a

device to ascertain the balance of profit, in monetary terms, that has been made over a period of business.³³

Various kinds of capitalism have existed in many parts of the world, but, for Weber, a different kind of capitalism developed uniquely in the West, namely, the “rational, capitalist organization of (formally) *free labor*.” Weber identified other factors that also made rational capitalism possible in the West. The first one is the separation of business from the household (which separates corporate and personal property), and the second is rational bookkeeping. In addition, a rational system of law and administration was necessary so that reliable formal rules were available to govern business activity, and this system developed only in the West. Each of these factors facilitated the precise calculation of profit and the rational organization of formally free labor. All of them are important conditions for rational capitalistic enterprise. However, it is worth also stressing the key significance of a strong cultural drive to constant application in work, which, after all, as Weber pointed out in *The Protestant Ethic*, was itself irrational from the point of view of achieving happiness.³⁴

For Weber, modern Western capitalism and the market society are characterized by formally rational economic action “that is rationally oriented by deliberate planning, to economic ends.”³⁵ Economic action is formally rational when the “provision for needs ... is capable of being expressed in numerical, calculable terms.”³⁶ This does not mean that the production of a certain amount of profit or the production of certain utilities as cheaply as possible is ethically good or bad. Any such evaluation would consider the substantive rationality of economic action in terms of its ultimate ends or values, which may be political, ethical, religious, egalitarian, or whatever. Socialistic standards would involve considerations of social justice and equality, but, whatever ultimate ends are considered, such a criterion of rationality goes beyond formal calculability, however rational the means that may be applied to the chosen ends. Weber accepted that the pursuit of calculability within modern capitalism might produce results that are objectionable when assessed by some ethical standard. He identified some “substantively irrational” consequences of modern capitalist production (to be discussed later), such as the growth of managerial authority in the workplace and the growing inequalities of income due to the bargaining superiority given to property ownership in the market.³⁷

MODERN CAPITALISM AND THE “IRON CAGE”

Although Weber’s well-known metaphor, the “Iron Cage,”³⁸ seeks to capture how markets and commodities constrain the individual, Weber is not usually seen as a critic of capitalism. Also, as already stated, he saw socialism as less rational and more bureaucratic than capitalism. Socialism, to him, represented not the dictatorship of the proletariat but the dictatorship of the official.³⁹ He saw modern capitalism, and its orientation to the market, as more rational than any other system, but his ambivalence toward modern, market capitalism can also be seen in his awareness that rationality can lead to irrationality, in ways that will become clear as we look at his concluding remarks in *The Protestant Ethic* and his comments on capitalist discipline, the ethos of bureaucracy (discussed more fully in the following chapter), and rational law.

Weber’s methodology, as we discussed in the previous chapter, rests on the analysis of individual, purposeful social action, and, in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber provides an analysis of how a Protestant-influenced motivation toward economic action produced a uniquely Western capitalism, which submits the individual to its demands. In the following passage, Weber describes how capitalism has become a constraint upon the individual:

Today’s capitalist economic order is a monstrous cosmos, into which the individual is born and which in practice is for him, at least as an individual, simply a given, an immutable shell [*Gehäuse*] in which he is obligated to live. It forces on the individual, to the extent that he is caught up in the relationships of the “market,” the norms of its economic activity.⁴⁰

The market society also demands that the employer submits to its rules: “The manufacturer who consistently defies these norms will just as surely be forced out of business as the worker who cannot or will not conform will be thrown out of work.”⁴¹ The rules once grounded in both an ethical-religious orientation to work and a rational economic system, then, seemed to take on a life of their own. Wilhelm Hennis believes that Weber was concerned with the cultural problem of the age in terms of the ability of people to choose their conduct in life, on the one hand, and the impact of rational institutions on the personality of

those who live in them, on the other. This problem is particularly acute when, under material and technical constraints, the choice of life conduct is “rationalized away, discipline is enough.”⁴²

Over time, the original religious motives for performing dedicated work in a calling fell away, and, in the concluding pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber reflected on the unintended effects of this change:

The Puritans *wanted* to work in a calling; we are *forced* to do so. For when asceticism moved out of the monastic cells and into working life, and began to dominate inner worldly morality, it helped to build that mighty cosmos of the modern economic order (which is bound to the technical and economic conditions of mechanical and machine production). Today this mighty cosmos determines, with overwhelming coercion, the style of life *not only* of those directly involved in business but of every individual who is born into this mechanism and may well continue to do so until the day that the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed.... In Baxter’s view, concern for outward possessions should sit lightly on the shoulders of his saints ... But fate decreed that the cloak should become a shell as hard as steel (*stabhartes Gehäuse*).⁴³

The fate of the “savage,” in Weber’s view, was to live in the belief that life is controlled by magical or mysterious forces that could not be completely controlled. Despite the potential for liberation provided by rational thought, science, and technology, the fate of men and women in modernity, then, is one in which technology, the market, and “the outward goods of this world gained increasing and finally inescapable power over men as never before in history.”⁴⁴ How is it that Weber is still discussing the fate of people in modernity and their lack of control despite society having attained a high level of rationalization and intellectualization, which enables the realization that everything is potentially understandable, humanized, and disenchanting – in other words, allowing people to perceive that social and economic arrangements are humanly created artifacts that have the potential to be changed? The answer lies in Weber’s view of capitalist modernity, which he believes is complex and ambiguous.⁴⁵ There is a paradox in Weber’s conception of the fatefulness of modernity for, as Anthony T. Kronman points out, “modernity means enlightenment and greatly enhanced possibilities of

human control, but it also means the increasing domination of fateful forces, among which he includes reason itself.”⁴⁶

What kind of irrationalities does rationalization produce? An answer to this question can be found in Weber’s discussion of the irrationalities produced in rational systems such as the factory, bureaucracy, and the modern legal order. For Marx, the division of labor and mechanization are inextricably bound up with de-skilling workers, alienation, and issues of power. Here, Weber concurs with Marx, recognizing that one of the “substantively irrational” consequences of modern capitalism is produced by the imposition of factory discipline. In *Economy and Society*, Weber explains his argument:

No special proof is necessary to show that military discipline is the ideal model for the modern capitalist factory, as it was for the ancient plantation. However, organizational discipline in the factory has a completely rational basis. With the help of suitable methods of measurement, the optimum profitability of the individual worker is calculated like that of any material means of production. On this basis, the American system of “scientific management” triumphantly proceeds with its rational conditioning and training of work performances, thus drawing the ultimate conclusions from mechanization and discipline of the plant. The psychophysical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines – in short, it is functionalized and the individual is shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism; in line with the demands of the work procedure, he is attuned to a new rhythm through the functional specialization of muscles and through the creation of an optimal economy of physical effort. 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 individually differentiated conduct.⁴⁷

Mirroring Marx’s analysis, this passage contains a powerful critique of the ways in which a rationalized system of production makes the

individual worker conform to the demands and pace of the machines and how tasks and skills are appropriated by “experts” who calculate the most efficient ways of performing tasks. The fate of the industrial worker is a loss of control over the work process. As explained in the following chapter, bureaucracy ubiquitously spreads across all forms of work organization because of its efficiency, calculability, and rationality. Further, within bureaucracies where the authority and function of the bureaucrat is bound by rules set by those who occupy the upper levels of the hierarchy, Weber argues, the bureaucrat is equally controlled by the organization. These points echo Marx’s discussion of the alienated workers’ loss of control over the work process, which he presented in the *Paris Manuscripts*, although Weber does not extend his argument, as Marx does, to the loss of control over the commodities produced by labor or the alienation of workers from their “species being.”

The rationalization of the legal order has produced a similar loss of control.⁴⁸ The development of a rational legal system removes the



Photo 11.1. For Marx, machinery is inextricably bound up with alienation and power. Here Weber concurs with Marx, recognizing that one of the “substantively irrational” consequences of modern capitalism, “joyless living,” is produced by the imposition of factory discipline.

sacred and magical elements of primitive law and comes to be perceived as a superior technical legal apparatus analogous to superior modern technology. The law has become increasingly technical so that those not trained in its intricacies have to rely increasingly on specialists and experience a loss of control. The processes of rationalization and intellectualization, in Weber's vision, have led to a situation in which, theoretically, the inhabitants of modernity dwell in a disenchanted world, are liberated from the control of gods or magic, and collectively have more control over their material and social circumstances. At the same time, paradoxically, their fate is to live in a new form of "bondage" – in a "shell" constructed by the institutions that humans have made. Living in the Iron Cage of modernity means living with a feeling of being trapped.⁴⁹ This phenomenon of modernity is captured by sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–62) in his book *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* ([1951] 1973), describing the impotent "little man" who works in a bureaucratic organization, "who is acted upon, but does not act."⁵⁰ Workers relayed their experience of daily routine work to American researchers. Studs Terkel writes, "For the many there is hardly concealed discontent.... 'I'm a machine,' says the spot welder. 'I'm caged,' says the bank teller, and echoes the hotel clerk.... Blue collar and white call upon the identical phrase: 'I'm a robot.'"⁵¹ There is an intellectual case that whereas Durkheim's social theorizing examined the intersection of anomie and suicide rates, Weber's theorizing connects the Iron Cage to anxiety and mental health.⁵²

CRITICISM

The German-American sociologist Reinhart Bendix notes the paradoxes of Weber's scholarly work: "His lifetime study [the development of rationalism] revealed not only the complexity of its antecedents, but the precariousness of its achievements."⁵³ Almost every aspect of Weber's Protestant asceticism thesis has been subject to criticism by economic historians and sociologists.⁵⁴ Weber was well informed regarding Marx's materialist conception of history, and he believed that Marx's major analytical concepts were "extraordinarily fruitful." Weber seems to repudiate the importance of economic processes and assigns primacy to ideologies in governing human action. This interpretation leads to

the criticism that Weber illegitimately replaced Marx's materialist thesis with an idealistic one. Weber explicitly denies this aim: "It cannot be our purpose," writes Weber, "to replace a one-sided 'materialist' causal interpretation of culture and history with an equally one-sided spiritual one."⁵⁵ This statement has not stopped Marxist sociologists from criticizing Weber for his apparently subjectivist and individualist approach to social change.⁵⁶

A second criticism is that Weber neglected the fact that capitalism predates Calvinism. Evidence that capitalism took shape well before the 1780s, and before the influence of Calvinism began, is part of a postmodernist debate that disputes whether or not the British Industrial Revolution occurred or if it is, in fact, a myth. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm comments: "It has become fashionable ... to deny that objective reality is accessible ... I believe that without the distinction between what is and what is not so, there can be no history."⁵⁷ Weber's account of the connection between Calvinism and capitalism does not obviate the preexistence of capitalism in the early-modern period. By 1850, however, there was abundant evidence of rational capitalism on an unprecedented scale that counts as an Industrial Revolution, so, for Weber, Calvinism did *not* cause capitalism, but it did help shape the qualitative formation and the quantitative growth of the social revolution. Weber's account of the trajectory of modernity is Eurocentric and excludes most women and non-Whites from the "community of moderns."⁵⁸

A third criticism is Herbert Marcuse's analysis of Weber's theory of industrialization and capitalism. Marcuse takes issue with Weber's concept of formal rationality, which he believes Weber "turns into *capitalist* rationality."⁵⁹ The irrational "acquisitive drive" was transformed, Marcuse argues, into a rationally controlled motivation via a religious "inner-worldly asceticism" that then became the crucial economic motor of modern capitalism – an engine that can be defined as the orientation to continuous and ever-renewed gain within the rationally organized capitalist enterprise. This capitalist enterprise involves a systematic measurement of profitability using methods of accounting so that reason becomes a technical matter of the mastery of individuals and materials in a system of calculable efficiency (factories and bureaucracies). But asks Marcuse, "*to what purpose* does it control them?" Formal rationality appears to be an abstract value-free concept, but it

is bound by the fact that economic activity to satisfy human needs is restricted by the framework of private enterprise and the calculation of profit for the entrepreneur or enterprise. The category of reason (or what is deemed rational) reflects the values of the economic class that owns the means of production. The measure of rationality is based on the calculations of the entrepreneur and the separation of the worker from the means of production, on the buying and selling of *free* labor; both buyer and seller are essential to this measure, as already discussed. These two features of capitalism are presented as technological necessities for the existence of a formally rational calculative capitalism, which is contrasted with the sort of rational action that is imbued with substantive value.

Marcuse rejects this dichotomy into two types of rational action and argues that the idea of formal rationality contains an implicit substantive rationality:

The very concept of technical reason is perhaps ideological. Not only the application of technology but technology itself is domination (of nature and men) – methodical, scientific, calculated, calculating social control. Specific purposes and interests of domination are not foisted upon technology “subsequently” and from the outside; they enter into the very construction of the technical apparatus.... Such a “purpose” of domination is “substantive.”⁶⁰

Thus technical reason reflects a political agenda, and, in a different political culture, it could contribute to the liberation rather than the domination of people. While Weber sees such liberation as utopian, Marcuse intimates that Weber was, perhaps, ambivalent toward technical reason:

It is difficult to see reason at all in the ever more solid “shell of bondage” which is being constructed. Or is there already in Max Weber’s concept of reason the irony that understands but disavows? Does he by any chance mean to say: And this you call “reason”?⁶¹

A fourth criticism of Weber’s analysis of capitalism is linked to his deterministic “Iron Cage” thesis, particularly its incessant pessimism. Although Weber’s and Marx’s views are grounded in a similar philosophical anthropology, Weber’s sociology was pessimistic about the effects of



Photo 11.2. George Ritzer’s popular McDonaldization thesis draws upon Weber’s theory of rationalization. Weber regarded bureaucratized work routines as irrational and destructive of the “joy of living.”

domination on human liberation and about the likelihood of our escape from the Iron Cage. Weber never recognized the human agency to exploit *inherent* potential within capitalism and to shape alternatives. Marx, on the other hand, was optimistic about the opportunity for liberation. The difference in their views has been summed up succinctly: “Marx proposes a therapy while Weber has only a diagnosis to offer.”⁶² These contrasting views of Weber and Marx might help us to understand why Marx, not Weber, still has a following in the liberation movement.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Along with the controversy over “value freedom” in research, debate around *The Protestant Ethic* has been one of the longest-standing

disputes in modern sociology.⁶³ According to Weber, ascetic Protestantism accelerated the process of rationalization, and this, in turn, affected the trajectory of modernity. In contrast to Marx's view, Weber's narrative of development avers that the development of Western capitalism cannot be explained through wholly material and structural forces: it was embedded in the interconnected process of rationalization. The concept of "elective affinity" (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) is an analytical tool used by Weber for interpreting human history.⁶⁴ According to Weber, there is an elective affinity between ascetic Protestantism and a specific "spirit" that had to be absorbed by the capitalist.

Such a reading of *The Protestant Ethic* inspired many proponents of modernization theory in the postwar era; that having the right kind of "spirit" is a precondition for capitalism to spread in the Global South. By the late 1970s, modernization theory was discredited, as non-Protestant Eastern countries – India, Japan, and Korea, for example – experienced economic growth of a magnitude greater than any European country had during their own industrial revolution. As Vivek Chibber observes, "If there was a specific 'spirit' that had to be internalized by capitalists as a precondition to their success, it was clear that it was pretty widely available."⁶⁵ An alternative explanation for the spread of capitalism is that it does not depend on prior socialization of a capitalist "spirit," but rather, the capitalist conforms to the rules attached to where they are located, and they follow the logic of market competitiveness and capital accumulation. Again, to cite Chibber: "Capitalists ... adjust their normative orientation – their values, goals, ethics, and so on – to the social structure in which they are embedded, not vice versa, as with so many other social relations."⁶⁶ Similarly, Weber's work suggests there is an active relationship or elective affinity between rational capitalism and rationally designed jobs and bureaucracies.

George Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis applies Weber's theory of rationalization to the fast-food industry.⁶⁷ Ritzer claims that the McDonald's fast-food restaurant has surpassed bureaucracy in the process of rationalization identified by Weber. And although McDonaldization has many advantages, Ritzer takes on the task of highlighting the negative side, which is not so widely disseminated.

According to Ritzer's thesis, the spread of McDonaldization to many other organizations across the world is due to four features of the McDonald's model. First, efficiency: it provides the fastest way to

achieve a particular goal, such as moving to having a full stomach from the state of being hungry. Second, McDonald's offers its customers food that can be easily quantified and calculated, hence the stress on big servings, value for money, and rapid service. Third, McDonald's offers predictability, as the food is identical in each outlet. Finally, McDonald's epitomizes *control* over employees, especially through technology. Like Weber, Ritzer is concerned with the ways in which irrationalities may limit or undermine rational forms. The main irrationality of McDonaldization, in Ritzer's view, is its dehumanization. The work is routinized and de-skilled, leading to low staff morale and high turnover rates among the workers, who are not allowed to think or be creative. Ritzer labels the phenomenon of this tension between the process of rationalization and the attendant loss of human control, initiative, and creativity as an example of the "Iron Cage."

The economic and cultural driving forces behind McDonaldization are too strong, in Ritzer's view, to be stopped. Like Weber, he takes a pessimistic view, seeing rationalization as an unavoidable fate: what will bring it to an end will probably be an even more rational social form.

We should draw attention to more recent scholarship that has critiqued Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis and sought to nuance understanding of Weber's Iron Cage. In *The Iron Cage Revisited*, R. Bruce Douglass argues that Ritzer's attention is on consumerism, which did not concern Weber. Moreover, the descriptors used by Ritzer, from rationality to control, are not terms that Weber used. Weber considered the bureaucratized work routines as irrational and destructive of the "joy of living." Ritzer, argues Douglass, seems to have missed the significance of Weber's first sentence in his description of the Iron Cage: "The Puritans *wanted* to work in a calling; we are *forced* to do so."⁶⁸ In other words, the Puritan workaholic was driven by the fear of not being on the list of the Elected, not any desire for efficiency. The Iron Cage is emblematic of the helplessness of the disempowered, who, in C. Wright Mills's words, "is acted upon, but does not act."

Weber's rationality and irrationalities concepts have validity for our own time. He was aware of the achievements of a rational society, but he was also deeply concerned with its limitations – so much so that he feared a rationalized future would usher in a "polar night of icy darkness and hardness."⁶⁹ Weber articulated the Catch-22 and tragedy of capitalist modernity. In the twenty-first century, new reappraisals of his

work, however, point to the possibility of taking advantage of “rusting iron cages” and to the potential for “breaking vicious circles” within the dynamics of late modernity.⁷⁰ Further, with the advent of digitalization and artificial intelligence, interest in Weber’s metaphorical Iron Cage has been revived by critical scholars of organizational sociology, a development we discuss in the next chapter.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 What key aspects of Calvinism does Weber believe contribute to the development of modern capitalism?
- 2 Explain Weber’s concept of “rationalization” and the “disenchantment” of modernity. As a condition, is nihilism precipitated by various forces of modernity?
- 3 Compare and contrast Weber’s discussion of the Iron Cage with Marx’s discussion of alienation.

12

Max Weber: Social Classes and Legitimate Domination

Max Weber's discussion of social class and legitimate domination speaks to the theme of inequality and power. In the context of late modernity, social class can seem intellectually passé, but class matters because the class divide shapes life experience and mortality rates in society. Class inequalities persist in most countries, but by North American and European standards the British class system is still particularly pernicious. Emblematic of Britain's class system is the "scaled back" coronation of Charles III and the Queen Consort. Despite the King having a reported personal fortune of £1.8 billion (US\$2.3 billion), the affair cost the British government an estimated £50–100 million (US\$64–128 million).¹ It was also reported that King Charles III is to receive a pay increase from £86 million to £125 million (US\$110–160 million) annually from the UK government.² Details of the public funds spent on the coronation remain a secret, but the expenditure and the 45 percent pay rise come against the backdrop of around 11 million people living in relative poverty, and around 2.99 million people – including retired seniors, the working poor, nurses, and teachers – using food banks amid the cost-of-living crisis.³ This vignette of contemporary Britain demonstrates a profound amplification of inequality, which testifies to the return of the class divides that characterized Victorian and early twentieth-century unregulated capitalism. Much has changed over the decades since Weber was writing, but the nature and distribution of power remain central issues for social theorists.

In this chapter we examine Weber's writings on social class. For Weber, the class position that individuals occupy depends upon their location in market capitalism. Individuals who have the economic power to access and obtain experience, skills, or knowledge can enjoy superior life chances. The data on inequality reaffirm the ongoing traction of theories of class that were characteristic of the onset of the classical era. The chapter discusses the way Weber conceptualized power and how it is legitimated in the context of his three ideal types of domination.

SOCIAL CLASS AND STATUS

In his writings on class, Weber finds much common ground with Marx and Engels. Weber agrees with Marx and Engels that industrial capitalism is predicated on a reservoir of formally free labor. It requires a sufficient pool of individuals who are in a state of extreme economic dependence and compelled to sell their labor power to employers. Weber writes, "The development of capitalism is impossible, if such a property-less stratum is absent, a class compelled to sell its labor services to live."⁴ In his theory of class, Weber clearly builds upon the analysis developed by Marx. In *Economy and Society*, Weber explicitly refers to Marx: "The unfinished last part of Karl Marx's *Capital* apparently was intended to deal with the issue of class unity in the face of skill differentials."⁵ Weber and Marx both regard society as characterized by conflicts over resources and power. Sounding distinctly Marxist, Weber argues that the ownership of property constitutes a "positively privileged property class"⁶ and that the factor producing class derives from the "relative control" within "a given economic order."⁷

In an oft-quoted passage, Weber identifies three conditions for a class to exist: "We may speak of a class when (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 the 'class situation.'"⁸ Thus, Weber sees a class emerging when a large number of people share similar life chances in the commodity or labor markets. By *life chances*, he means the ability to gain access to scarce

and valued goods and services such as property, education, and training. The ownership of property confers power on the propertied classes. For Weber, as for Marx, social class in a modern capitalist society is more complex than a simple two-class model of capitalist and proletariat. Although Marx in his later work refers to “three big classes,” he also recognizes the existence of a “middle and intermediate strata.”⁹ Weber, too, identifies a variety of social classes: “The working class as a whole – the more so, the more automated the work process becomes, the petty bourgeoisie, the propertyless intelligentsia and specialists (technicians, various kinds of white-collar employees, civil servants – possibly with considerable social differences depending on the cost of their training), the classes privileged through property and education.”¹⁰

In their 1848 *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels predicted that the petty bourgeoisie would “decay and finally disappear”¹¹ and “sink” into the working class in the face of modern industry. Over a quarter-century after the death of Marx, Weber noted the enduring presence of the petty bourgeoisie. He also witnessed the unprecedented growth of the new middle class: technicians, supervisors, and civil servants. Weber’s class analysis closely overlaps with his theory that rationalization comes to dominate the modern world. As an economic process, rationalization is associated with mass production and a highly specialized division of labor. This process is vividly demonstrated by 1914–18 trench warfare, which, according to Weber, “means the worldwide triumph of this form [rationalization] of life.”¹² Trench warfare battles of 1914–18 were battles of materials (*Materialschlacht*). During the battle of Jena in 1806, Napoleon expended fewer than 1,500 rounds of artillery to defeat the Prussians. In 1914, France planned for 10,000–12,000 shells of artillery *a day*; by 1918, production had reached 200,000 shells a day.¹³ The mass slaughter of human lives on the Western Front required mass production of hitherto inconceivable quantities of military products, which, in turn, accelerated rationalization, specialization, and the bureaucratic modes of control essential for the mobilization of resources. This rationalization of war caused a burgeoning of white-collar technicians, managers, and civil servants.

For Marx, the class stratum is determined according to people’s common relationship to the means of production, the means by which a large-scale grouping of people gain a livelihood. Weber’s class theory, by contrast, was predicated on an economic struggle to control



Photos [12.1](#) and [12.2](#). For Weber, the access that people have to societal resources, such as education, is crucial in determining people's life chances. The top photograph of working-class pupils with their teacher was taken in the 1890s in England. Notice that the children are not wearing shoes and contrast with the photograph of privileged private boarding school pupils of the Victorian uber wealthy.

particular markets: money, commodities, or various job markets, for example. For Weber, control over a profitable market is the chief basis of class differences: “‘Class situation’ and ‘class’ refer only to the same (or similar) interests which an individual shares with others. In principle, the various controls over consumer goods, means of production, assets, resources and skills each constitute a *particular* class situation.”¹⁴ For example, the elite, privileged upper class typically comprises those who succeed in gaining a monopoly on some lucrative market; the less privileged classes, such as the shrinking old “working class,” typically comprise those who fail to achieve a monopoly on their bundles of skills and are subject to the leveling forces of the free market. Weber continues, “A *uniform* class situation prevails only when completely unskilled and propertyless persons are dependent on irregular employment. Mobility among, and stability of, class positions differ greatly; hence the unity of a social class is highly variable.”¹⁵ Here Weber’s view of social class emphasizes that skill may constitute a form of property. Thus, Weber distinguishes between *property* classes, typically comprising “rentiers” receiving income from the ownership of land, mines, and factories; *commercial classes*, typically comprising “entrepreneurs” offering services on the market, such as bankers and financiers; and *professionals*, who are typically lawyers and physicians. These social classes are “positively privileged.” In contrast, paupers and the unskilled who have neither property nor specialized skills constitute the “negatively privileged.”

For Marx and Engels, social class and class consciousness are inextricably bound up with class struggle. Here Weber differs sharply from Marx, recognizing that Marx’s notions of a “class for itself” and class solidarity did not resonate among the new white-collar managers, intelligentsia, and government mandarins. Whereas Marx refers to the specter of class antagonisms and class struggles, Weber emphasizes that social conflict and demands for radical changes to the economic system need not occur simply because of the differentiation of classes. The following passage explains his argument:

The mere differentiation of property classes is not “dynamic,” that is, it need not result in class struggles and revolutions. The strongly privileged class of slave owners may coexist with the much less privileged peasants or even the declassed, frequently without any

class antagonism and sometimes in solidarity (against the unfree). However, the juxtaposition of property classes *may* lead to revolutionary conflict between ... landowners and the declassed or ... creditors and debtors.... These struggles need not focus on a change of the economic system but may aim primarily at a redistribution of wealth. In this case we can speak of “property revolutions” [*Besitzklassenrevolutionen*].¹⁶

As an example of the absence of class conflict, Weber cites the relationship of the “poor white trash” to the plantation owners in the southern United States. The former were, he argues, “far more anti-Negro than the plantation owners, who were often imbued with patriarchal sentiments.”¹⁷ Weber believed that his multiple-class model of class meant that there is no simple relationship between class position and class consciousness. Importantly, the mere differentiation of class is not dynamic, as Marx had thought. For Weber, class constitutes a vital objective factor in the formation of consciousness, affecting “life chances” in the market in a variety of ways; but significantly, economic and class interests are not automatically transposed to “solidaristic” class consciousness.¹⁸

Weber recognized that class is not purely an economic and market phenomenon. Alongside the objective aspect of social class is a subjective aspect whereby individuals are located hierarchically in society by virtue of status (*Stände*). “In contrast to the purely economically determined ‘class situation,’” Weber writes, “we wish to designate as a *status situation* every typical component of life of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor*.”¹⁹ In modern society, argues Weber, status came to be typically founded on style of life, that is, formal education or hereditary or occupational prestige. Symbols of status, including education, manner of speech, apparel, and occupation, all have the effect of shaping an individual’s social status in the eyes of others sharing the same culture.

Weber adds complexity to the ideas of class promulgated by Marx and Engels by introducing the notion of “status group,” which he defines as “a plurality of persons who, within a larger group, successfully claim (a) a special social esteem, and possibly also (b) status monopolies.”²⁰ Weber explains that status groups are created by virtue of lifestyle or occupation, through hereditary charisma (e.g., members of a European

royal family), or through the monopolistic appropriation of political powers. His approach is often seen as antagonistic to Marx and Engels's sociology, but, in *Economy and Society* (first published in 1921), Weber discusses the developing "solidarity" of the various classes, which is close to Marx and Engels's view of the working class. Weber also discusses social classes in terms of "privileged" education. This concept would imply that each status group has a distinctive culture and the propensity to see the world in a particular way. The cultural milieu of each status group has ideas that reflect its members' own interests and also the social conditions that surround these interests.

It is plausible to argue that each status group defends its monopoly and position in society and, for this reason, may be considered an economic network. The lifestyle of the status group depends and draws upon its economic resources and wealth. The dominant upper classes, for example, buy education for their children from private schools such as Eton in England or Appleby College in Canada or Trinity School in the United States – elitist bastions of privilege – as a process of turning education and social capital into economic capital. The concepts of class and status group have been a subject of debate among readers of Weber, and Weber himself is hardly eloquent on the point. On the one hand, he defines *class* in terms of relative control over income-producing resources and material wealth, but he also maintains that status groups are founded on noneconomic "style of life."

In practice, suggests Weber, class and status tend to correspond, but he is adamant that this need not necessarily be the case. An individual can have class without status and status without class. For example, in the latter category would fall a junior professor whose income may not differ very much from the salary of a customer service manager at a bank. On the other hand, the professor's position may confer more status in society at large. Weber explains the disjuncture between class and status as follows:

Status *may* rest on class position of a distinct or an ambiguous kind. However, it is not solely determined by it: money and 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 reason for it. Conversely, status may influence, if not completely determine, a

class position without being identical with it. The class position of an officer, a civil servant, or a student may vary greatly according to their wealth and yet not lead to a different status since upbringing and education create a common style of life.²¹

For Weber, status may vary independently of class position. The term *genteel poverty*²² refers to the conferment of high status to an individual with little or no economic wealth. A *status group* refers to a plurality of individuals who are socially distinct and exclusive in terms of consumption patterns and lifestyle, and, as such, asserts Weber, “the status group comes closest to the social class.”²³ He further explains, “With some oversimplification, one might thus say that classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas status groups are stratified according to the principles of their *consumption* of goods as represented by special styles of life.”²⁴

There is a dynamic dimension to social stratification that results from struggles between different classes and status groups in production and markets. Power constitutes an expression of the distribution of interests within society and is an integral dimension of social stratification. Power may be valued for the economic rewards it confers but also for the social status it bestows on itself. For Weber, classes, status groups, and political parties, which represent interests determined either through class or status positions, are “phenomena of the distribution of power within a community.”²⁵ Weber’s writings on the complex interplay of class, status, and party offer a foundation for analyzing social stratification. In multicultural societies, for example, a disjuncture between class and status positions may occur because of racial or ethnic status. For instance, a wealthy African American or Asian entrepreneur might not be situated in the same subjective or status hierarchy as a member of the majority population who, in pure economic terms, has an identical class position. In part because of his multifaceted approach to determining status, Weber’s work has had a considerable influence on American sociology, as status and social mobility are central to the “American dream,”²⁶ and status forms part of the structural functionalist theory of social stratification. The Weberian influence is also evident in W.E.B. Du Bois’s discussion of class and status in African American history (see [chapter 14](#)).

POWER, DOMINATION, AND BUREAUCRACY

Reinhard Bendix explains that Weber, in his sociology of religion, gives greater weight to ideology and interests than to the theme of power (*Macht*) and domination (*Herrschaft*), which has also been translated as “authority.” This emphasis is reversed in his sociology of politics.²⁷ At the center of Weber’s political sociology are his theories of power, domination, and the state. He does not define *power* in terms of class economic interests but in terms of social action as “the chance of a man [*sic*] or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.”²⁸ He emphasizes that, in this general sense, power is an aspect of virtually all social relationships. Men can exercise power in the family unit, at social events, in public discourse, and in the market. However, the underlying premise of his analysis is that power per se is an insufficient basis for ordering social action. Weber defines *domination* as “the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons.”²⁹ Domination, according to Weber, can be legitimate or illegitimate (coercive). Weber was primarily interested in legitimate forms of domination or power, or what he called legitimate authority, that allocates the right to command and the duty to obey. He argues that every form of rule attempts to establish and cultivate the belief in its legitimate authority. The starting point for his theories is his classification of legitimate domination into three types: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. These typologies are related to Weber’s social action, and they are also ideal types, as discussed in [chapter 10](#).

Traditional domination is based on the sanction of immemorial traditions and on belief in the legitimacy of those who exercise authority. The pure form of traditional domination is *patriarchy*, literally translated as “rule of the father,” which describes domination by male heads of household. Weber suggests that the feudal system of monarch, nobles, and serfs is a form of patriarchal domination. This patrimonial authority will be based on personal loyalty and obligation to the ruler: “The obedience is owed to the *person* of the chief who occupies the traditional sanctioned position of authority and who is (within its sphere) bound by tradition.”³⁰ In such regimes the exercise of power is highly personalized and discretionary in a variety of ways, for instance, by eating at the ruler’s table, by rights of land use in return for services, and by bestowing or receiving fiefs.³¹

Charismatic domination is based on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, whose authority will typically be theocratic. The English word *charisma* derives from the Greek *kharisma*, meaning “favor” or “grace.” Weber defines the term *charisma* as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least especially exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader.”³² Weber believes that charismatic domination involves four related elements: an individual of exceptional powers or qualities, a social crisis, a radical solution to the crisis offered by the individual, and devoted followers. Ancient and modern history offers many examples of charismatic power. Thus, presumably, the disciples obeyed Jesus Christ because he possessed charisma; leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi in India and Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran were also charismatic. Weber posits that charismatic power, unlike traditional domination, is a powerful force for social change, which abandons traditional rules: “Charismatic belief revolutionizes men ‘from within’ and shapes material and social conditions according to its revolutionary will,” writes Weber.³³

Charismatic domination, some argue, is the “something” that differentiates Winston Churchill from Clement Attlee, Margaret Thatcher from John Major, or more recently, Barack Obama from Mitt Romney, Nelson Mandela from Jacob Zuma, and Nicola Sturgeon from Liz Truss. Based on Marx’s analysis of Napoleon Bonaparte’s coup, Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence, and Weber’s insistence that charismatic leaders emerge only during periods of a crisis or “moments of distress,”³⁴ an alternative understanding of charismatic power emerges. It can be seen as a quality conferred on a “supernatural” leader by virtue of particular situations and crises rather than as a quality or individual trait.³⁵ Thus, in 1940 following the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill demonstrated charisma. In the United States, writes the Canadian historian Margaret Macmillan, “the cult of Winston Churchill” evokes his stirring speeches – “Britain shall never surrender”³⁶ – in his stand against appeasing the charismatic, demonic Adolf Hitler. But Churchill’s charisma melted away like fresh snow in late spring after the war. Although it might



Photo 12.3. Statue of Nelson Mandela. US President Joe Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau are embodiments of legitimate domination. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), who led the nationalist movement against the British rule of India, and Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), who led the fight against apartheid, remained on US terrorist watch lists until 2008, and was imprisoned for 27 years (once released, he was elected president of South Africa), are perceived to possess Weber's charismatic authority.

seem surprising, Ken Loach's 2013 film *The Spirit of '45* contains a clip from a newsreel showing Churchill campaigning for reelection on an open platform being booed by the audience, which seems to contain many "demobbed" soldiers and sailors. Indeed, in 1945, the Labour Party defeated Churchill's Conservative government in the general election. In Britain, Churchill is also remembered as a politician who had his share of failures and controversial views: as architect of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in 1915; for his rabid anti-union views, for example when he advocated a "shoot them down" policy toward strikers during the labor unrest of 1910–14;³⁷ for his strongly imperialist position; and for his notorious comment about Mahatma Gandhi, "this malignant subversive fanatic."³⁸

In the 1980s, it appeared that Margaret Thatcher also possessed charismatic powers during the Malvinas (Falklands) War with Argentina, and this view was later reinforced, for some, with her government's victory in the coal miners' strike of March 1984 to March 1985. A twist in Weber's thinking is his argument that the influence of a situation may lie not in the presence of a moment of crisis but in its *absence*. The absence of crisis, uncertainty, and fear, argues British academic Keith Grint, may generate a need on the part of some people for an exciting alternative to the routine boredom of everyday life.³⁹ Importantly, charismatic power is conferred upon a leader by his or her followers, but it can also be retracted. Weber devotes time to discussing how charismatic power, in its pure form,

is foreign to the routines of everyday life and involves the “routinization of charisma.”⁴⁰ Once a crisis has passed, charismatic leaders must transform themselves back into everyday life, but, when they do so, their power or qualities begin to fade. Charisma will, therefore, tend to develop into either traditional or legal-rational domination.

Legal-rational domination refers to “a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority).”⁴¹ Modern democracies are ruled through legal-rational authority. This domination is based on obedience of citizens toward legally established impersonal laws. The *pure* type of legal-rational domination rests on the acceptance of the validity of several mutually interdependent ideas: the legal norms are established by agreement or by imposition on grounds of expediency or value-rationality or both; every body of law is part of a consistent system of abstract rules; the leader is subject to the same body of law; the followers obey in their capacity as members of a community, organization, or state; and followers obey only what is the law.⁴²

Legal-rational domination may take several structural forms, but generations of sociology students have come to know this type of power through Weber’s concept of bureaucracy. For Weber, a bureaucratic regime is “the purest type of exercise of legal authority.”⁴³ It is both a *form* of domination and a way of describing the *location* of domination. Weber proposes that bureaucracy symbolizes modernity as a type of work structure or “constitution” (*Arbeitsverfassung*). Collective action is bound by *routine* tasks and written *rules* within a clearly defined *hierarchy* in which lower positions are controlled by higher ones. The concept of *Arbeitsverfassung* is, however, more than a technical phenomenon, “it is a form of rationalization of action and domination that requires specific cultural and structural resources [and] a logically coherent socioeconomic and political system.”⁴⁴ As we noted in the preceding chapter, a bureaucracy is an example of an ideal type, and Weber depicts bureaucratic regimes in such terms:

The purely bureaucratic type of administrative organization ... 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.⁴⁵

The increasing spread of bureaucracy in modern capitalist societies may be explained by the systematic rationalization of economic and social life. As Weber observes,

The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely *technical* superiority over any other form of organization. The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration, and especially in its monocratic form.⁴⁶

Weber viewed the power exercised through modern bureaucracies with some apprehension, and he discusses at length the potential negative aspects of bureaucracies. He states that the more perfectly bureaucracy is developed, “the more it is dehumanized,”⁴⁷ as it “reduces every worker to a cog in this [bureaucratic] machine and, seeing himself in this light, he will merely ask how to transform himself from a little into a somewhat bigger cog.”⁴⁸ He believed that, once such bureaucratic structures are established, the calculus of self-interest within the system of legal-rational domination “is practically indestructible.”⁴⁹ The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of specialized activity and is only a small cog in the total organizational machine. The masses, for their part, cannot abolish the bureaucratic apparatus once it exists, for it is predicated upon an attitude set on habit and expert knowledge, and thus the idea of dismantling this apparatus becomes more utopian. Bureaucratic regimes were a threat to individual initiative because of the irresistible force of “rational discipline,” which amounts to nothing less than consistently rationalized, methodically prepared, and exact execution of the received order. Mired in with bureaucratic regimes,

personal autonomy and creativity are suspended, and argues Weber, the mandarin is unswervingly and exclusively set for carrying out commands. Likely under the influence of Nietzsche, Weber assigns substantial weight to charismatic leaders as an antidote to the antidemocratic ethos of bureaucracies.⁵⁰ And Weber's writings reveal a symmetry in his thinking if his pure types of domination are placed alongside his typology of social action: traditional action/traditional authority; affectual action/charismatic authority; and instrument-rational action/legal-rational authority.⁵¹

WEBER'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICS IN THE CLASSICAL ERA

In 1917, Weber published a political treatise that involved a long discussion of German politics and political institutions, which he generally assessed negatively because of their tendency to permit a bureaucratic domination of politics and their failure to allow politicians of high caliber to emerge into leadership positions.⁵² He immediately stressed that this political discussion could not "claim the protective authority of any science,"⁵³ a position that is consistent with his ideas on the separation of political views from scientific ones. In this essay, Weber makes revealing statements regarding the dangers of the expansion of a rational, bureaucratic organization of social life. He begins his argument thus:

In a modern state the actual ruler is necessarily and unavoidably the bureaucracy since power is exercised neither through parliamentary speeches nor monarchical enunciations but through the routines of administration.... It is they (civil servants) who decide on all our everyday needs and problems.⁵⁴

Weber argued that if private capitalism were to be eliminated, then "the top *management* of the socialized or crown corporations would become bureaucratic" and bureaucracy would be extended without the checks provided by the existing private bureaucracies in the economy. Weber anticipated a bureaucratic "shell of bondage" based on discipline imposed by machines and the rational, specialized, and hierarchical nature of bureaucracy.⁵⁵ Weber portrays the advance of bureaucracy

as “an ‘inescapable’ fate” and as “irresistible,” but, at the same time, he argues that bureaucracy has “inherent limitations” in the context of both government and the private economy because of the difference between entrepreneurs, directors, and politicians compared with officials:

“To be above parties” – in truth, to remain outside the realm of the struggle for power – is the official’s role, while this struggle for personal power, and the resulting personal responsibility, is the lifeblood of the politician as well as the entrepreneur.⁵⁶

It is the “irresistible advance of bureaucratization”⁵⁷ that makes responsible leadership rare. Weber’s vision involves the process of rationalization (as a kind of fate), which allocates ever-increasing positions of power to officials who lack the vision and responsibility of “real leaders.”⁵⁸

To lead in a responsible way, Weber thought, a person has to be not only a leader “but a hero [*sic*] as well, in a very sober sense of the word.... Only he has a calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say ‘In spite of all!’ has the calling for politics.”⁵⁹ But the rationality of science undermines value standpoints, namely, the ultimate ends that leaders might draw upon to give their actions meaning. The disenchantment of the world implies that religion, in particular, has lost its authority because, as science and technology show, there are no mysterious forces that can be invoked – everything, in theory, can be calculated and known. At the same time, science cannot tell us how to live, and science does not give the world any meaning.⁶⁰ Science can lend clarity in the sense that it can tell us which means will produce a particular result, even if it cannot tell us which ends to choose.⁶¹ This is why the political leader has to be sober and responsible, considering the possible means and results as well as deciding which “is God for him and which is the devil.”⁶²

Weber discussed how it had become the fate of people to be controlled by rational institutions, which he described as forming an “iron cage,” a “steel shell,” or a “shell of bondage.” The ways in which the system of capitalist factory discipline and the strength of bureaucratic

rules reduce the freedom and creativity of the worker and the official were outlined in the previous chapter, as was the domination of the law over the person not qualified in legal matters. Weber states this critique, which has Marxist overtones, sympathetically “without ever actually endorsing it.”⁶³

Weber’s second critique of modernity stems from a critique of German politics and its institutions. Weber argues that modern society provides little scope for the emergence of real politicians capable of being serious leaders and exhibiting a form of independent, committed, disciplined, and responsible leadership – the kind of leadership that goes beyond the duties and morality of the legally constrained official. This sort of detached and sober but committed leader makes claims to legitimacy that go beyond the equality-based legitimacy of the bureaucratic and legal order. Such a leader inspires obedience and makes demands upon people based upon his or her claim to possess special individual qualities of leadership (charisma). The first critique implies changes to social and economic arrangements so that the egalitarian ideals of the legal-rational and bureaucratic order can be achieved. The second critique is based upon a fundamentally different view, which is more antidemocratic and elitist. If the first critique suggests that Weber is quite close to Marx, the second one points to the influence of Nietzsche’s writings. Weber refers to the same personal qualities in a leader as does Nietzsche – courage, passion, responsibility. Weber also references the antidemocratic implications of using these qualities as a basis for claiming legitimacy. These two positions are contradictory and stand fundamentally opposed, with egalitarian ideals, on the one hand, and the idea that some people possess special qualities that make them stand apart, on the other. Each of these critical positions with their notions of the “fate” of people in a rationalized modernity indicates that Weber was not simply a spokesperson for the superiority of Western institutions. Nevertheless, in Kronman’s view, “there was an oscillation between irreconcilable perspectives that helps to explain why he has found supporters as well detractors on both Left and Right.”⁶⁴

Weber’s historical sociology has at its center a conflict between the process of technical rationalization and the creative individual or “cultured man.” There could be no turning back from the long cultural development and embrace of rationalization, and, at times, Weber

showed great pessimism, forecasting a bleak future in which people would be as dominated as they were in ancient Egypt – especially if private capitalism were eliminated. Also, when discussing the capitalist system that the religious motivation to work had helped to create, he referred to dominant capitalism as a “mighty cosmos” that binds people to the demands of “the technical and economic conditions of machine production.” Weber describes the situation in this way:

No one yet knows who will live in that shell in the future. Perhaps new prophets will emerge, or powerful old ideas and ideals will be reborn at the end of this monstrous development. *Or* perhaps – if neither of these occurs – “Chinese” ossification dressed up with a kind of desperate self-importance will set in. Then, however, it might truly be said of the “the last men” in this cultural development “specialists without spirit, hedonists without a heart; these nonentities imagine they have attained a stage of humankind never before reached.”⁶⁵

The dialectic between bureaucracy and individual freedom, between individuality and rationality, was essential to maintain a dynamic society and central to Weber’s world view. Weber hoped that an element of economic and political freedom and creative leadership in the form of responsible leaders in a free-market capitalism – however small their chances of survival in the face of rational, technical bureaucracies – would prevent social ossification. This “attitude was one of heroic pessimism.”⁶⁶

CRITICISMS

Contemporary literature on organizational sociology is imbued with Weber’s analysis on the rise of bureaucracies, from factories to corporations to state apparatus, with social control being a stronger determinant in some cases than economic efficiency.⁶⁷ Several features of bureaucracy suggest that employment in such organizations would be stable and full time; that the stability and permanence of a bureaucracy were “predicated upon an attitude set on habit and expert

knowledge.”⁶⁸ Changes instituted by neoliberalism since the 1980s created a globalized economy in which companies became increasingly flexible or “lean,” especially in their patterns of employment of labor. Guy Standing,⁶⁹ for example, argues that the only groups who could be said to be employed in the type of bureaucracies described by Weber form a “salariat” located in large public sector organizations, and in a “shrinking ‘core’ of manual employees, the essence of the traditional ‘aristocracy’ of labor.”⁷⁰ A key question is how do these new patterns of employment affect social class? Standing identifies a new “class-in-the-making” (though not yet a “class-for-itself” in the Marxist sense), which he calls the “precariat” – a term that involves a linkage of the class’s precarious state and its similarities with the proletariat. The precariat has been created as companies impose flexible ways of employing labor and aspire to “travel light.”⁷¹ If Standing’s discussion of the precariat is correct, then rational economic decisions within multinational corporations, to enable them to maximize return for shareholders, have changed the social structure and made social stratification more complex.

Another criticism of Weber is that he views charismatic leaders purely positively and disregarded despotism.⁷² As we have pointed out, Weber assigned considerable weight to the role of “superhuman” individuals in history. He believed that charisma could be an antidote to the inexorable advance of bureaucracy. Weber was personally committed to authoritarian citizenship, and his view of German politics is definitely elitist, which sits somewhat uncomfortably with his commitment to Western liberal tradition.⁷³ Although Weber considered that the unrestrained demands of the German working classes for equality posed a threat to Western liberal democracy, by contrast he “regarded as comparatively negligible the danger that the rule of the *Führer*, legitimized through personal plebiscite, could turn into a dictatorial (or even fascist) regime.”⁷⁴ Weber’s theory of charismatic political leaders reveals the pending threat to liberal democracy from the rise of German fascism in the 1930s, headed by the charismatic but malignant Adolf Hitler. Given that Weber was well aware of the political weakness of the German middle class, it is incomprehensible “why he failed to anticipate the possibility of an antiliberal fusion of the charismatic and bureaucratic principles.”⁷⁵

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Class structure is part of a global system of reproduction of social inequalities. As others have noted, oppositional agency to global-wide inequalities has a class and gender dimension, as illustrated by the #MeToo movement, the “Gilets Jaunes” (Yellow Vest) protests in France, and campaigns and strikes by trade unions.⁷⁶ From a Weberian perspective, organizations are arenas for producing and reproducing social inequalities. They can be understood as a bureaucratic and technological scaffolding that forges, and is forged by, class struggle.⁷⁷

Weber’s rationalization thesis informs his theory of social class. He believes that class divisions derive not only from control of the means of production and property but also from access to resources such as education, which affect an individual’s position in the labor market and, in turn, overall life chances. To illustrate, North Americans are increasingly familiar with the term “digital divide,” which describes the enormous difference in digital technology and internet access between different racial and socioeconomic groups. This divide or “technological poverty” is real and has a long-term detrimental effect on life chances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, with more computer and internet resources at home, research found that school students in working-class families were spending far fewer hours a day learning online, compared to students of better-off middle-class families. Thus, one unintended consequence of the digital revolution is the digital divide which negatively affects the attainment gap and exerts compounding influences on social inequities.⁷⁸ The approaches of Weber and Marx have been combined into an influential theory of class by the American sociologist Erik Olin Wright.⁷⁹

To examine the applicability of Weberian sociology to a specific modern socioeconomic trend, we need look no further than academia. Weber’s idea that an individual can have class without status and status without class fits well with recent contemporary changes in the academic labor process.⁸⁰ In universities in Britain and North America, academics experience precarious employment, teaching on temporary, fixed-term contracts. This trend has prompted claims that university “education has become one of the most ‘casualized’ sectors of employment – second only to the hospitality industry.”⁸¹ A Weberian analysis would posit that, although junior professors have status founded on the possession

of relatively scarce formal education, their class position is not valued by society at large in a way that is commensurate with this status. Thus, one might argue that, unlike other professions, teaching-only university professors have failed to protect their monopoly over scarce social knowledge, and, as a consequence, they have fallen into the emerging “precariat class.”⁸² True to Weber’s central argument, part-time faculty have a peculiar status position, as they do not fall neatly into high-status professional occupations. That the Weberian concepts of class and status can be applied to the employment of academics further illustrates classical social theory in action.

Weber forewarns that bureaucratic systems can produce irrationalities, such as the dehumanization of workers. He pessimistically warns of the tendency of workers to experience an Iron Cage – a perception of “helplessness” and “bondage.” The Iron Cage imagery is one of the most influential metaphors among the general critiques of modernity. The design of bureaucratic organizations is predicated on the imperative to control work space and the pace of work. As a form of rationalized control, quantification reduces the world of work to calculable quantities. This appears to improve organizational efficiency, yet, at the same time, threatens to reduce workers to “cogs” in a machine.⁸³ While Marx’s alienation is not synonymous with Weber’s bondage, there is a deep kinship between the two.

In the twenty-first century, AI-mediated bureaucracy constitutes levels of rationalization that Weber, in his wildest dreams, could not have imagined. French sociologist Emmanuel Lazega’s analysis of contemporary organizations draws upon Weberian sociology. He argues that digitalization constitutes “a new form of bureaucracy that uses both panoramic, intrusive and precise knowledge of private [co-worker] relationships.”⁸⁴ Social digitalization – defined here as an articulation of digital identity, the creation of digitalized social networks, and platform-mediated work – enables management to control and redefine worker autonomy, especially professional or middle levels of collegiality. Ultimately, digitalization has the potential to usher forth “a new moment in the Weberian rational bureaucratic iron-caging of social life.”⁸⁵ Within this debate, Steele and Bratton echo Weber’s social critique of modernity, arguing that the AI-mediated workplace potentially provides a disguised form of intensified control over the labor process – what they label a Weberian “digitalized cage.”⁸⁶

A Weberian analysis of social digitalization raises key questions about class and power. In the era when Weber was writing, literacy gave access to information and participation in social institutions. One feature of contemporary Western society is the growing ubiquity of apps. When OpenAI released ChatGPT, for example, its use went from zero to 1 million users in five days, and within two months its use reached 100 million, making it the fastest-growing app ever. Something analogous to literacy is already beginning to happen with algorithmic technologies: apps such as Uber, Deliveroo, or Task Rabbit enable workers to gain access to employment – so-called “gig work” – and various apps provide phenomenal access to information and social networking. However, without being technologically deterministic, digitalization has the intrinsic potential to weaken workers’ power in the employment relationship.⁸⁷

In the larger societal context, to understand how digital technology intersects with social stratification, we should ask “Who has access to opportunities?” and “How does this phenomenon manifest itself differently across class divides?” In 2023, 98 percent of surveyed Canadians between the ages of 18 and 29 owned a smartphone; the rate of ownership among Canadians aged 50 or more is lower, with 72 percent reporting smartphone ownership.⁸⁸ This “digital divide” causes lifestyle inequalities that have negative consequences. It also creates a social underclass and entrenchment of corporate power. To illustrate what we mean by this, consider access to health care. Residents of Alberta, Canada, can retrieve their medical records, including laboratory results, via a medical app. The facility enables patients to ask pertinent questions to their physician, thereby offering actors a heightened sense of empowerment. But access is contingent because it is monetized in the form of a smartphone and internet subscription. It is likely that this access to personal health records correlates with a younger, more affluent demographic.⁸⁹ Digital poverty, broadly definable as an absence of communication technology causing wealth and lifestyle inequalities, deepens health inequalities and, to paraphrase, arguably creates a “lumpen-digitalariat” – an underclass on the fringe of society.⁹⁰

To take our cue from Weber, digital technologies are incessantly paradoxical. The intrusiveness of algorithmic systems potentially can impose “algorithmic control” and “algorithmic surveillance” that enhances corporate power unobtrusively, further promoting the Weberian Iron Cage

of bureaucratization. In sum, in organizations where there is a deep-seated imperative to control the work space, the phenomenon of the contemporary equivalency of Weber's Iron Cage can advance understandings about modern capitalism and is, therefore, highly relevant to our own world.⁹¹

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 What are the characteristics of charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational forms of domination?
- 2 How does Weber's theory of class and status compare with Marx's discussion of class? How do their views result in different understandings of social change?
- 3 Weber's sociology has at its center a conflict between the processes of rationalization and the creative individual. How can digitalization impact these social processes?

13

Classical Feminists on Gender and Society

The intellectual legacy of Enlightenment ideology is a masculine vision of the process of human history and of social life. This is despite the fact that women wrote and published philosophy in the eighteenth century. In the process of industrialization, some skills and occupations became obsolete while simultaneously generating demand for new ones, and new ways of doing paid work had a profound impact on public attitudes toward gender roles, on everyday relationships, and on patterns of family life. However, classical theory courses have traditionally presented the history of academic sociology through a masculine lens as interpreted in the works of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. This notable deficiency means that the “classical” sociological canon offers an inadequate framework for understanding many important aspects of modernity. Marx’s account of the labor process both conceptually and empirically obscures the way that gender roles, patterns of family life, and conceptions of sexuality are socially constructed. Likewise, Durkheim offers a dichotomized, hierarchical perspective of the sexes.¹ And Weber’s analysis of social life occurs in the context of “natural inequality” between the sexes.² This did not augur well for women’s freedom and equality.

The aim of this chapter is to examine scholarship that became the foundations of feminist social theory. The genesis of feminist discourse can be traced back to the Levellers’ movement in seventeenth-century England, so without any claim to exhaustivity, we focus on four of the

best-known feminist intellectuals: Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Rosa Luxemburg, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Had there been more space, we would have included others, such as Marianne Weber and Jane Addams, and those who provide a standpoint based also in their experience of racial inequality.³ The first documented use of the word *feminism* dates back to 1837 in France. Its meaning over the centuries has been elastic, never unitary; it has stretched from contesting gender inequalities and women's subordination to men, to challenging "naturalistic" explanations for social facts, to exploring critically its intersections with, for example, race, class, colonialism, and imperialism.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759–97)

A product of the European Enlightenment, Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the earliest bourgeois feminist thinkers who was able to publish her thoughts on the organization of society. She lived long before social science had a distinct existence, but she believed that the Enlightenment values of equality, rationality, and freedom ought not to be restricted by gender or race. Although these ideas found expression among elements of the educated elite, Wollstonecraft articulates her ideas in a particularly forceful way. She is recognized as a feminist contributor to the early development of a rational, empirically based sociological theory.

Wollstonecraft's Life and Works

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London, England, in 1759. Her father inherited wealth but managed it badly, so Wollstonecraft had to support herself. At first, she attempted to live from professions considered suitable for women: governess, lady's companion, and principal of a small school. In 1787, she found her lifetime mentor, the publisher Joseph Johnson. In 1793, she moved to France where she observed at first hand the turmoil and bloodshed of the French Revolution. Although appalled by the violence, she criticized those such as Edmund Burke who rejected the Revolution on the basis of sentiment about the past.⁴ In the context of eighteenth-century England, it is not surprising that Wollstonecraft was largely home educated. A number of intellectual



Photo 13.1. Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London, England, in 1759. She was one of the earliest feminist thinkers to publish her thoughts on the differences between Enlightenment thought and social realities. She died in 1797.

influences informed her feminist analysis of society. She had access to the writings of Mary Astell (1666–1731), described as the first English feminist.⁵ She was also aware of the aspirations of the English working-class movement known as the Levellers, who campaigned for the equality of women and universal suffrage in the seventeenth century.⁶ Another possible source of inspiration was her involvement in a group of Unitarian Rational Dissenters who believed, among other things, in the perfectibility of the conditions of life through applied conscience and reason, as opposed to hierarchy and tradition. Her major work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was widely and internationally read, translated, and publicly discussed in her time. She died in 1797 while giving birth to her second daughter.

Gender Equality

Theorizing about society is intimately connected with the European Enlightenment and the birth of modernity. As we discussed in [chapter 3](#), the Enlightenment movement was not a unified body of thinking but was internally fractured and riddled by contradictions. The eighteenth-century public debate on women's emancipation and rights is an example of its intellectual silences and anomalies. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is a product of this debate. The book is a rebuttal of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and of the views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, it was Burke's notion that women's beauty is to be attributed to their "littleness and weakness" that Wollstonecraft found particularly abhorrent. Wollstonecraft's riposte to deeply conservative Burke upheld the French Revolution's ideals and attacked the idea of inherited power as enshrined in the monarchy and

the Church. She argues that “every man had the right to be judged on his own merits as an individual and not by his specific race, caste, or class, [and] she came to see that same principle should apply to women too.”⁷ She posits that while women are not actually equal to men, they deserve social equality with men and should be given the education necessary to compete on an equal basis.

Should experience prove that they [women] cannot attain the same degree of strength of mind, perseverance, and fortitude, let their virtues be the same in kind, though they may vainly struggle for the same degree; and the superiority of man will be equally clear, if not clearer; and truth, as it is a simple principle, which admits of no modification, would be common to both. Nay, the order of society as it is at present regulated would not be inverted, for woman would then only have the rank that reason assigned her, and arts could not be practised to bring the balance even, much less to turn it.⁸

For Wollstonecraft, women’s isolation in domestic activities and their socially engendered need to be physically attractive to men spoil them for full partnership in the making of a new world:

Strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves – the only way women can rise in the world – by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry, they act as such children may be expected to act: they dress; they paint, and nickname God’s creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio! – Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?⁹

We should contextualize Wollstonecraft’s writings. In eighteenth-century England, women could not vote, attend university, enter professions, or report serious domestic violence, and the age of consent for a female was still a “flexible twelve,” as it had been since 1275.¹⁰ A close read of the textual evidence shows that she never questions the assumption that motherhood is a natural condition for women or that



Photo 13.2. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that young women should be given the education necessary to compete with men on an equal basis. This photograph taken around 1910 of working-class girls in a London school shows the slow pace of equality in education. For a working-class girl, training on how to wash clothes was part of the school curriculum to prepare her for the role of housewife or maid to the rich.

some professions are unsuitable for them. “Women might certainly ... be physicians as well as nurses,” she writes, adding:

And midwifery, decency seems to allot to them ... They might also study politics ... Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would not then marry for a support, as men accept of places under Government, and neglect the implied duties; nor would an attempt to earn their own subsistence, a most laudable one! sink them almost to the level of those poor abandoned creatures who live by prostitution.¹¹

Wollstonecraft’s arguments largely focus on the family and education. An example of this is her response to Rousseau’s instructive tale,

Emile.¹² In book five of *Emile*, Rousseau describes how “Sophy, or Woman” is to be educated so that the hero, Emile, will be a family man without sacrificing his right to freedom. Sophy needs only the education, mainly sexual, that will keep her husband in a state of mind such that he wants to be at home. Wollstonecraft rejects sexuality as the basis for marriage and argues that women’s education should give them as much knowledge of the world as men. She writes, “‘Educate women like men,’ says Rousseau, ‘and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.’ This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.”¹³

Wollstonecraft argues that women deserve social equality with men, but, in her analysis, she connects the oppression of White women and Black slaves.¹⁴ In likening woman’s historically subjugated position to that of slaves, she writes, “When, therefore, I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense.”¹⁵ Thus she posits that, if rationality is essentially human, it is irrational not to apply it to both women and slaves.

HARRIET MARTINEAU (1802–76)

Harriet Martineau was a beneficiary of Enlightenment thinking, and she believed that the study of society ought to be methodologically rigorous. She agreed that the new American Republic demonstrated that people had the ability to govern themselves and that the Declaration of Independence embodied the principles of universal justice, but she also recognized that class split apart the society of the Republic. Further, like Alexis de Tocqueville, she recognized that slavery and democracy contradict each other, and that this contradiction was similar to the illegality of excluding women from the democratic process. And, like Wollstonecraft, she identified certain parallels between the status of White women and the status of Black women slaves. Although she recognized Wollstonecraft’s pioneering influence, Martineau did not agree with Wollstonecraft’s way of approaching the woman question. She writes, “Every allowance must be made for Mary Wollstonecraft herself, from the constitution and singular environment which determined her course: but I have never regarded her as a safe example, nor as a successful champion of Woman and her Rights.”¹⁶ A strong-minded, cigar-smoking, unmarried, and outspoken woman, Martineau did not escape criticism in her own right.



Photo 13.3. Harriet Martineau was born in Norwich, England, in 1802. Despite the threat of violence and social exclusion, she was a fervent abolitionist and became prominent among anti-slavery circles. She died in 1876 at Ambleside, England.

Martineau's Life and Works

Harriet Martineau was born into an upper-middle-class Unitarian family in Norwich, England. Her father was owner of an import house and a member of an elite intellectual circle. Her mother was literate but lacking in formal education. Martineau loved to write, but when callers came, she had to hide her writing, which was considered unsuitable for a woman.¹⁷

By 1828, her family faced extreme financial difficulties when the family business dissolved. Showing an attitude that took her through life, she writes, "Being thrown, while there was yet time, on our own resources, we have worked hard and usefully, won friends, reputation and influence, seen the world abundantly ... and truly lived instead of vegetated."¹⁸

By 1829, she had made a precarious transition to a writing career. When her hearing loss became severe, she required

a trumpet hearing aid. By 1834, however, she was financially secure, and she had become a regular participant in a London literary circle that included Charles Dickens, William Wordsworth, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Darwin. From 1834 to 1836, Martineau traveled through the United States, practicing sociological observation. A fervent abolitionist, she became prominent among anti-slavery circles, despite the threat of violence and social exclusion that was aimed at women abolitionists of the time.¹⁹ Martineau's first publications were in the Unitarian periodical *The Monthly Repository*. One of these, "On Female Education," published in 1822, was a protest against the injustice of the exclusion of women from higher education.²⁰

Her reputation was established by her series of *Illustrations of Political Economy*.²¹ These popular booklets explain the principles of political economy in a simplified form. Her engaging writing style carried

on into her sociological works, such as *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838),²² *Society in America* (1837),²³ and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838).²⁴ In 1855 she became desperately ill,²⁵ after which she did not leave her home. She died on June 27, 1876, at Ambleside, England.

Intellectual Influences

Harriet Martineau was profoundly influenced by Unitarian ideas and values during her youth. The Unitarians favored rational democratic individualism and human responsibility for social conditions. This doctrine included *necessarianism*, which held that “all the workings of the universe are governed by laws which cannot be broken by human will.”²⁶ These ideas helped her to develop the notion that identifying universal laws and adjusting social life to them would bring progress.²⁷ Another of her major influences was the utilitarian belief of Jeremy Bentham that the purpose of life is to increase the amount of happiness in the world.²⁸ For Martineau, policies that enhanced happiness were deemed progressive. An example of this can be found in her explanation that higher forms of charity are those that alleviate and prevent the most unhappiness.

The lowest order of charity is that which is satisfied with relieving the immediate pressure of distress in individual cases. A higher is that which makes provision on a large scale for the relief of such distress as when a nation passes on from common alms giving to a general provision for the destitute. A higher still is when such provision is made in the way of anticipation, or for distant objects; as when the civilization of savages, the freeing of slaves, the treatment of the insane, or the education of the blind and deaf mutes is undertaken. The highest charity of all is that which aims at the prevention rather than the alleviation of evil.²⁹

Morality, Slavery, and Politics

In Martineau's *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, morals are described as widely shared values that are demonstrated through texts such as the Declaration of Independence, the songs and writings that

everyone knows, and gravestone epitaphs. Manners are defined as actual practices. Manners can be empty formulas for courtesy, or they can be deeply rooted customs. Wide differences between morals and manners, and areas of great unhappiness, are *anomalies* that require action. Slavery and the oppression of women are anomalies in a society that claims equality in the pursuit of happiness, and inequality of wealth is an anomaly in a republic of equals. Fear of public opinion is an anomaly in a nation that values freedom of expression.³⁰ Published in 1838, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* is the first systematic methodology and theory treatise in sociology. It outlines the mechanics of unbiased data gathering, corroboration, and the practice of theorizing based in concrete observations. In this, Martineau envisions the reader as a traveler, who should use informed “sympathetic understanding” as a research tool.³¹

She understands that, in every observation, there are at least two sides, the observer and the observed, and that “the mind of the observer, the instrument by which the work is done, is as essential as the material to be wrought.”³²

Martineau’s traveler searches for what is representative in the way that people talk (discourses), the way that they act (practices), and the records of these thoughts and activities (things). *Things* are the most important of these. The number and kind of suicides and the number and kind of criminals are things that reveal the ideas and problems of the time. She observes that “in England almost all the offences are against property and are so multitudinous as to warrant a stranger’s conclusion that the distribution of property among us must be extremely faulty, the oppression of certain classes by others very severe, and our political morals very low.”³³

Martineau’s *Society in America* reflects her method of comparing stated morals to actual practices. The American Declaration of Independence, which embodied John Locke’s theory of natural rights, declared that government derives its power from the consent of the governed and that it is the duty of a government to protect the rights of its citizens. What so appalled Martineau was the advocacy by some leading proponents of democracy, such as Thomas Jefferson, for dominant masculine suppositions, the “political non-existence of women,”³⁴ and the exclusion of slaves from full citizenship in representative democracy. Thus, she holds up the American documents that

claim government gets its legitimacy from the consent of the governed and compares them with the actual condition of women (and slaves) in American society. Women were granted indulgence, not enfranchisement. She would later describe this method as flawed by “the American theory which I had taken for my standpoint.”³⁵ The topic needed to be treated in a more concrete way, she said.³⁶ By this, she meant that social change should be found among the people themselves rather than within the ideologies of government. It is on this basis that she criticized what she called the “Wollstonecraft crowd” who agitated for legal reforms.³⁷

Martineau’s later works show the continuation of her interest in social theory. *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848), a study of the evolution of religion, was received mainly as a travel book about the Near East.³⁸ Reviewers expressed shock at her position that religion is both socially constructed and outdated. Her best-known contribution to the development of sociology is her edited translation of Auguste Comte’s six-volume *Cours de philosophie positive* into *The Positive Philosophy* (1853), a version Comte so approved that he translated it back into French and substituted it for his original edition.³⁹ The years between the 1850s and her death saw a prodigious output of her newspaper columns and articles on contemporary women’s issues, including education and discriminatory laws. She also wrote or revised two historical texts, *History of the Peace: Being a History of England from 1816 to 1854* (1864–5) and the *History of England, A.D. 1800 to 1815* (1865), and engaged in extensive political lobbying on social issues.

ROSA LUXEMBURG (1871–1919)

A product of European revolutionary politics, Rosa Luxemburg was one of the most creative Marxists in the early twentieth century.⁴⁰ In her time, she was best known as a Marxist theorist and antiwar activist. She was active in radical politics while still in high school. In 1889, she moved to the University of Zürich, Switzerland. There she studied political economy and law, receiving a doctorate in 1898, at a time during which women rarely even attended university. In 1913 she published her magnum opus, *The Accumulation of Capital*, in which she

offers a critical exposition of the economic and social consequences of capitalism. Luxemburg was imprisoned for her opposition to World War I.

Luxemburg's Life and Works

Rosa Luxemburg was born on March 5, 1871, into a lower-middle-class Jewish family in the small town of Zamość in Russian-occupied Poland. Her father was a timber merchant, and her mother was descended from a distinguished line of rabbis and scholars. Antisemitism, discrimination, and exclusion, all endemic in daily life, inevitably affected the young Rosa. Between 1880 and 1887, she attended grammar school in Warsaw, where she gained excellent grades. She became fluent in four languages, and it was at this time that she became active in progressive politics. Context is always important. Luxemburg was politically engaged at a time when women did not have the vote and, moreover, when politics was overwhelmingly a male domain. Luxemburg's independence of mind is illustrated by the fact that although she was not married, she enjoyed an active love life, a point that was considered highly provocative and conflicted with European morals of the period.

After finishing high school, Luxemburg went to the University of Zürich, transferring from the study of natural sciences and philosophy to political economy. In 1897, she completed a doctoral degree, the only woman to have done so among the sons of landlords and state officials. During this time, she maintained a close, personal relationship with the Lithuanian socialist Leo Jogiches. While Luxemburg challenged many social mores, she was not a "new woman" by modern-day standards. When a Dutch friend fell off her bicycle, Luxemburg wrote to commiserate, joking about her own repugnance of women riding bikes. And in 1917, she told her long-standing admirer of her "helplessness in 'earthly matters.'"⁴¹

In the 1890s, Luxemburg challenged both the Russian and the Polish Socialist Party because of their support of Polish independence. The national issue became one of Luxemburg's main themes. To her, nationalism and national independence were regressive concessions to the bourgeoisie. Her critics argue that she consistently underrated nationalist aspirations. This became one of her major

points of disagreement with the Russian leader, Vladimir Lenin, and his theory of national self-determination. In 1898, Luxemburg moved to Berlin, where she married Gustav Lübeck to obtain German citizenship. In Berlin she entered into the debate that divided the Social Democratic Party of Germany – reform or revolution. Eduard Bernstein argued that socialism in advanced capitalist countries could best be achieved through a gradualist approach, using parliament and militant trade unionism. Luxemburg profoundly disagreed. In *Reform or Revolution* (1889), she defended Marxist orthodoxy, arguing that parliament was a bourgeois imitation of democracy. Karl Kautsky, a leading political theoretician, agreed with Luxemburg.

In 1906 Luxemburg was arrested and released for taking part in the revolution in Russian-occupied Poland. Moving back to Berlin, she studied the implications of the 1905 Russian Revolution for the German working classes and defended political mass strikes as an instrument of radical social change. In 1907, Luxemburg helped develop an antiwar program for the international labor movement. Between 1907 and 1914, she lectured at the Social Democratic Party's school in Berlin. World War I (1914–18) divided the European labor movement.

Luxemburg was prone to ill health, but was principled, brave, quick-witted, funny, and, above all, thoroughly committed to socialist revolution.⁴² Her intellectual endeavors grew directly out of her life experiences and political activism. Her most important publications include *Reform or Revolution* (1889), *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and Trade Unions* (1906), *The National Question* (1909), *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), and *The Junius Pamphlet* (1915). Although she supported the 1917 Russian Revolution, in the posthumous publication of *The Russian Revolution* (1918) she gave a prescient warning against the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks. Before World War I began, Luxemburg called for a preemptive general strike to stop the war happening.⁴³ In 1914, at the outbreak of war, she was arrested and remained in prison almost continuously until 1918. *The Junius Pamphlet*, written in prison, was described as “one of the weightiest documents against the crime of war.”⁴⁴ Released from prison on November 9, 1918, Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were assassinated by a proto-fascist militia on January 15, 1919.



Photo 13.4. Rosa Luxemburg was born in Zamość, Poland, March 5, 1871. She produced a major critique of Marx's theory of capitalist reproduction. She was assassinated in Berlin, Germany, on January 15, 1919.

Intellectual Influences

An early intellectual influence on Rosa Luxemburg was the nineteenth-century Romantic writer Adam Mickiewicz, who challenged the oppression of the Polish people and made common cause with Russians defying the tsar.⁴⁵ During the 1880s, she was aware of Polish and Russian women being imprisoned and executed for their part in the revolutionary underground. Luxemburg joined small reading circles to study the literature by Marx and Engels smuggled into the country. In addition to formal academia at the University of Zürich, Luxemburg's intellectual development was shaped by debating, in the student circles she was part of, topics such as Darwinism, Marx, Bakunin, Tolstoy, the emancipation of women, and the demoralization of the bourgeoisie.

Her own scholarly writings reflect a deep theoretical understanding of Marxist economics. Like Marx, she believed that capitalism is a historical phenomenon, that the growth of capital necessitated increased exploitation of labor and natural forces, and that concomitant with the accumulation process there develops a reserve army of unemployed. However, she believed that Marx had created only a very general, abstract formula that did not fully examine the future economic limits of capitalist development.

Interestingly, Luxemburg recognized both the limits and the power of academia. Of university education, she wrote, "The social, historical, philosophical, and natural sciences are today the ideological products of the bourgeoisie and expressions of its needs and class tendencies." But, for the development of the working class, she posited, knowledge is power and "a lever of class struggle."⁴⁶ Luxemburg championed the cause of prostitutes who were imprisoned⁴⁷ and supported the suffragettes, but she never herself identified with the feminist movement of

her day, and always avoided being categorized as a “woman.” Her reasoning was political. She did not wish to be marginalized within the Social Democratic Party,⁴⁸ and regarded women’s liberation “as a diversion at a time when humanity as a whole confronted gigantic tasks.”⁴⁹ Works on Rosa Luxemburg paint a complex woman, “a genuine dialectician,” who juggled complex and often opposing realities. Her life work, however, remains “richly relevant” in the era of global neoliberal capitalism.⁵⁰

Capital and its Global Setting

Luxemburg wrote *The Accumulation of Capital* while teaching at the Social Democratic Party of Germany’s school in Berlin. She critiques Marx’s theory of capitalist reproduction, and in so doing she produced the first modern theory of underconsumption.⁵¹ The essence of her critique was provoked by Marx’s assumption of capitalist accumulation. She argues:

Marx’s diagram of enlarged reproduction cannot explain the actual and historical process of accumulation. And why? Because ... the diagram ... [assumes] that the capitalists and workers are the sole agents of capitalist consumption.... [And] assumes the universal and exclusive domination of the capitalist mode of production ... Under these conditions, there can be ... no other classes of society than capitalists and workers.⁵²

The affinity between Marx and Luxemburg clearly consists in the common emphasis on the means to increase surplus value. But whereas Marx identified the transformation of rural peasants into an urban-based proletariat class, as well as the appropriation of human (e.g., slaves) and material (e.g., cotton) resources from colonial countries, Luxemburg argues that Marx treats these processes as “incidental” – the travails by which the capitalist mode of production emerges from a feudal society.

Her critique was that these processes are indispensable for capital accumulation. She writes:

Since capitalist production can develop fully *only* with complete access to all territories and climes, it can no more confine itself to

the natural resources and productive forces of the temperate zone than it can manage with white labour alone. Capital needs other races to exploit territories where the white man cannot work.⁵³

The essence of Luxemburg's polemic is that mature capitalism needs to constantly expand across the globe for "untrammeled accumulation," and this impulse is the economic motivation for the colonial wars between the superpowers. For Luxemburg, the outcome is the dialectical phenomenon that mature capitalist countries provide ever-larger markets for, and become increasingly dependent upon, one another, yet they compete ruthlessly for trade relations with non-capitalist countries.

Luxemburg's thesis takes it as axiomatic that long-term capital accumulation can only be understood in the context of wider socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that shape these processes. The conditions for capital accumulation means "[c]apitalism must ... always and everywhere fight a battle of annihilation against every historical form of natural economy that it encounters, whether this is slave economy ... or patriarchal peasant economy."⁵⁴ Luxemburg's insight is that, to develop, capitalism had to "set free" labor power from "primitive social conditions,"⁵⁵ and she stresses the importance of consciousness influencing the women's liberation movement.⁵⁶ Luxemburg argued that the doctrine of free trade, rather than ensuring harmony between competing states, brought historical antagonism to the fore. Luxemburg writes:

In reality, political power is nothing but a vehicle for the economic process. The conditions for the reproduction of capital provide the organic link between these two aspects of the accumulation of capital. The historic career of capitalism can only be appreciated by taking them together ... and thus capitalism prepares its own downfall under ever more violent contortions and convulsions.⁵⁷

Luxemburg's reinterpretation of Marx's model wrongly supposed that capitalism must collapse once the entire globe had been colonized, Indigenous societies annihilated, and capitalism installed. Her theory underestimated capitalism's ability to mutate within its own system, not just by boosting the workers' spending power, but by transforming

nonmarket activities (e.g., health care, leisure, personal communications) into market ones.⁵⁸ Luxemburg's analysis remains relevant to current debates on the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and regime change, global inequality, the vulnerability of precarious labor in the digital economy, and the still unfolding story of a new arms race and international antagonism caused by free trade rivalries between the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN (1860–1935)

Charlotte Anna Perkins was born July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut. Through her father, Frederic Beecher Perkins, she was related to the reform-minded Beecher family, including Isabella Beecher Hooker, a famous suffragist, and Catharine Beecher, a writer and supporter of women's education.⁵⁹ Her father was a librarian, and her mother was a cultivated, musically gifted woman. Her father abandoned the family in 1859. The family became "charity relatives" who had to move often to get ahead of their unpaid bills.⁶⁰ To finance her education at the Rhode Island School of Design during the years 1878 to 1883, Perkins painted advertisements and gave drawing lessons. In 1884, she married fellow artist Charles Walter Stetson. Their daughter Katharine was born a year later. During this period, Charlotte experienced "severe and continuous nervous breakdown leading to melancholia – and beyond."⁶¹ In 1887, her condition worsened, and she decided that it was "better for that dear child to have separated parents than a lunatic mother";⁶² she left Stetson and moved to California. Her mental breakdown is vividly portrayed in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (first published in January 1892).

In California, she became involved with politics, found emotional support with women, and developed a reputation as a writer and public speaker. In 1896, she was invited to Hull-House. Her main contributions to social theory are found in *Women and Economics: The Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898),⁶³ which was subsequently published in nine editions and translated into seven languages; *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), also published in nine editions and translated into seven languages; *Human Work* (1904); and *The Man-Made World* (1911).



Photo 13.5. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1860. Like Friedrich Engels, she believed the nuclear family and home to be a site of women's oppression. Suffering from terminal breast cancer, she committed suicide in 1935.

In 1902, Perkins married Houghton Gilman, a New York lawyer, who supported her writing and speaking career. A year after her husband's death, and suffering with terminal breast cancer, she ended her own life on August 17, 1935.⁶⁴

Intellectual Influences

Perkins Gilman's writing reflects a unique intertwining of concepts from Marx, Engels, Darwinism, Durkheim, eugenics, Fabian socialism, the social gospel, Lester Ward's gynocentric (woman-centered) theory, Bellamy nationalism, populism, progressivism, and, of course, feminism. Like Marx, she believes human labor defines what it means to be human, and social power is based on the male control of economic resources. Like Engels, she believes the nuclear family and home to be a site of women's oppression. Like Durkheim, she draws on the work of Her-

bert Spencer and adopts biological imagery to analyze the organization of society. More problematically, her interpretation of social Darwinism informs her racist views on African Americans⁶⁵ and underlies her many calls to improve the race by reforming social institutions. Eugenics, both positive and negative, underlies her call for women to choose partners who are most suited to breed fit children and her recommendation that defective criminals be sterilized. Her views on race and eugenics buttress the overt racism that was ubiquitous among the Anglo-American and European social elite in the 1880–1945 period.⁶⁶ Aspects of Fabian socialism and the social gospel also merge as she imagines that Christianity evolved into a socialist form, shorn of its patriarchal trappings. Perkins Gilman saw herself as a sociologist and was influenced by sociologists. Among these, Lester Ward was particularly important. Ward's theory of androcentric society, she writes, was “the most important that

has been offered the world since the Theory of Evolution; and without exception the most important that has ever been put forward concerning women.”⁶⁷ Jane Addams and the women of Hull-House also influenced her, although she found their immersion in the lives of immigrants and the poor to be distasteful.

Work, Gender, and Family

Perkins Gilman emphasizes the centrality of human labor and women’s subordination in the economic process. In her most scholarly work, *Women and Economics*, she presents her feminist analysis of capitalism. The following *tour de force* contains the most succinct statement of her thought:

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. This third factor, the social environment, is of enormous force as a modifier of human 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.⁶⁸

On the importance of human labor, she writes: “To do and to make not only gives deep pleasure, but it is indispensable to healthy growth.”⁶⁹ This thought is a partial echo of Marx’s, except that, for Perkins Gilman, a change in women’s economic relationships would transform their social status and enable them to fulfill their creative potential. Such a change would rectify the situation she described in which the social status of women in society was achieved through the paid work of their men rather than because of women’s own labor.

Perkins Gilman is best known for her critique of the nuclear family. In the classical era, two other books examined marriage and the family, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) by Friedrich Engels, and *Wife and Mother in the Development of Law*

(1907) written by the German intellectual Marianne Weber. Marianne Weber focuses on marriage as both an institution for the subordination of women and a potential source for women's autonomy. Like Engels and Marianne Weber, Perkins Gilman puts the nuclear family at the center of women's subordination and exploitation. In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), Engels wrote the following:

The modern individual family is based on the open or disguised domestic enslavement of the woman; and modern society is a mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules.... In the family, he is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletariat.⁷⁰

Although Engels's analysis has been criticized for its "one-sided economic determinism," it appears to have shaped Perkins Gilman's thought on the issue. Applying Durkheimian concepts to unpaid domestic labor and childcare, Perkins Gilman argues that the specialization of labor is the basis of female emancipation and human progress. She argues that most women are essentially unskilled, unpaid laborers. Traditional housekeeping practices based on custom produce inefficient households. She argues that specialized occupations and training exist for cooking, cleaning, childcare, and health care, and, therefore, housekeeping should be professionalized too: "done by trained specialists with proper organization and mechanical conveniences, we could release the labor power of 80 percent of our women."⁷¹ She also advocates community childcare. In other words, Perkins Gilman argues for the family to be socialized.⁷²

Her journal *The Forerunner* (1909–18) was used to propagate her views on racial progress through increased procreative fitness. For Perkins Gilman, the ideal marriage, in accordance with the laws of evolution, occurs when a woman who has developed herself mentally and physically chooses a male who will be the best father for her child. When men do most of the choosing, she notes, they tend to select women who are weak and good looking rather than racially fit to produce and raise children.⁷³ In lines that echo Wollstonecraft's discussion of excessive sex differentiation, Perkins Gilman argues "our civilized 'feminine

delicacy” should be seen as “less delicate when recognized as an expression of sexuality in excess.” She writes, “The degree of feebleness and clumsiness common to women, the comparative inability to stand, walk, run, jump, climb, and perform other race-functions common to both sexes, is an excessive sex-distinction; and the ensuing transmission of this relative feebleness to their children, boys and girls alike, retards human development.”⁷⁴

Like Wollstonecraft, Perkins Gilman believed that women should be educated to take their place as leaders in society. A really feminine society, she argued, would accord women “freedom and knowledge; the knowledge which is power.”⁷⁵ She expressed many of her ideas

by inventing parallel worlds that satirically exposed social problems.⁷⁶ In the first of these, *Moving the Mountain* (1911), the narrator is a male who has come back to the United States after being lost in Tibet for 30 years. He finds a society in which men and women work just two hours a day. Meals are ordered from a specialized kitchen instead of made at home. Childcare is shared. Women are not willing to marry sexually promiscuous, abusive, or drunken men, and so those vices have been wiped out. When asked how this wonderful change came about, he is repeatedly told that it happened because of a change in women’s consciousness: “the women woke up.”⁷⁷ As with Martineau, Jane Addams, and Marianne Weber, Perkins Gilman endeavored to reach the public with accessible materials that would challenge existing social practices.



Photo 13.6. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is best known for her critique of the nuclear family, which, she argues, is the center of women’s subordination and exploitation. Taken during Perkins Gilman’s lifetime, this photograph shows a British coal miner washing after a shift and his wife pouring warm water in a metal bath. The life of a miner’s wife was hard: unrelenting housework, childbearing, and providing for husbands and children on a subsistence wage took a physical toll.

CRITICISM

Classical feminist social theory may have been subject to some of the weaknesses of “male-stream” classical theorizing. The first weakness is that, in their concern to reveal the social sources of women’s subordination, some of the early feminists tended to neglect the effect of class inequality. It’s argued, for example, that in a society in which men monopolize paid work and women lack economic independence, the call for gender equality in education leads to what has been called “Wollstonecraft’s dilemma.”⁷⁸ That is, equality enables women to be treated and valued equally only to the extent that they can behave like men. This, of course, ignores the ways in which women’s domestic responsibilities restrict their ability to compete for employment and how patriarchal strategies have historically excluded women from certain occupations,⁷⁹ which leaves women dependent on the goodwill of men to “snap their chains.”⁸⁰ The classical “liberal” feminist theorists have also been criticized for their uncritical acceptance of an inherently male model of rationality and their portrayal of women’s subordination as universal, when in reality their perspective reflects middle-class, White, Anglo-American women’s experiences of subordination. More specifically, Perkins Gilman’s work has been criticized for its ethnocentricity, elitism, and racism.⁸¹

Perhaps with the exception of Rosa Luxemburg and Perkins Gilman, the early feminists’ analysis of man-made obstacles facing women does not consider agency, that is, the creative potential of all members of society, irrespective of class, gender, or race, to understand, learn, adapt, and transform their social context. This perspective leads to a third criticism: that they underplayed the effects of power relationships and social structures in capitalist societies, which limit choice and, importantly, perpetuate inequality.⁸² Post-modernists are familiar with the notion that some voices are more equal than others, particularly those in positions of power. If we want to know, then, why female contributions have been written out of histories of classical social theory, we should examine not the content of the theory but the politics of class and gender and the resources with which the theory is disseminated. By this account, it’s

unsurprising that early feminist thought was erased from popular consciousness for many decades.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The history of classical social theory undertheorized gender and, at least, for the first seventy-years of the twentieth century, the issue of gender received little intellectual inquiry from the new male-dominated academic discipline of sociology. This is explained partly because gender issues have an epistemic edge, which appears as the problems of objectivity and advocacy.⁸³ Early male sociologists chose to focus more on grantsmanship and scholarship than social reform. In contrast, early feminist writers, such as Jane Addams, rejected the mainstream ideal of a “value-free” sociology, and chose instead to engage in research that would explicate how oppression works and to be advocates for reform. Therefore, feminism by definition takes sides.

The works by feminist thinkers covered in this chapter extend the traditional canon but also acknowledge the fundamental importance of their contributions to sociology. The present is informed by the past. Rebecca McQuillan observes, “Women persecuted as witches in the early modern period were typically those who existed outside male control, such as unmarried older women ... Fast forward 350 years and their equivalent is Hillary Clinton, maligned by arch Republicans ... fans who used the slogan ‘Burn the witch.’”⁸⁴ The contributions of the early feminists’ writings form the intellectual foundation for critiquing present-day theorizing about, and research on, modernity that neglects gender relations, women’s subordination, and misogyny.

Theoretically, one of the most important corollaries of feminist sociological theorizing on modernity is its power to question the adequacy of perspectives that offer naturalistic explanations of social facts and neglect exclusion, exploitation, inequality, conflicts, and contradictions that cannot be readily subsumed under class. These early feminist theorists developed a sophisticated analysis of the nature of society and the interplay between gender relations and structures of

power. By power we mean the processes of privileging and valuing certain identities over others, as well as access to and through various social institutions, such as the government, law, church, and education, among others. Early feminist scholarship emphasized that women's subordination and exclusion is an unnatural and unnecessary condition that can and should be ended.⁸⁵ Applying Enlightenment principles, Mary Wollstonecraft emphasizes that the historical subjugation of women is connected to male desire for social power. Harriet Martineau magnifies contradictions in the American Declaration of Independence, demonstrating how gender- and race-based inequality in education have resulted in the exclusion of women and African Americans from full participation in society. Through her analysis of mature imperialism, Rosa Luxemburg emphasizes the importance of consciousness for the feminist movement. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's most valuable intellectual contribution was that she challenges the romantic view of the nuclear family, explaining how it obscures the oppression of women, and in so doing, she permanently made gender economics a decisive analytical framework for her successors to use in much of their own research.⁸⁶ Perkins Gilman's argument on the nuclear family as a center of women's subordination and exploitation finds resonance in contemporary studies we draw on to examine the intersection between gender and work during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁷

Early feminist thought has helped successive generations of feminist thinkers to critically examine the position of women in modernity. It is arguable that our choice of Wollstonecraft, Martineau, Luxemburg, and Perkins Gilman simply maintains a bias that has already begun. Certainly, there are many other lost foremothers of social theory.⁸⁸ There is little doubt, however, that the female writers we have discussed in this chapter helped to develop the structural perspective on social problems and had impact on the overall development of social theory in a critical, often pragmatic, way. One hundred years after some women in Britain secured the right to vote, many of these feminist thinkers have been rediscovered, and their intellectual endeavors have become a recognized model in the field.⁸⁹

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 In the light of the #MeToo movement, to what extent does Wollstonecraft's dilemma remain a feature of gender relations today?
- 2 For Perkins Gilman, the nuclear family is at the center of women's subordination and exploitation. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 3 What specific advances in gender equality have occurred since the classical era? What specific issues highlighted by Wollstonecraft and Perkins Gilman are still problematic?

14

W.E.B. Du Bois on Race

Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States on January 20, 2009, becoming the first African American to serve in that office. In 2022, Rishi Sunak became the UK's first prime minister of color, an appointment by Conservative MPs. A few months later, in 2023, Humza Yousaf, the son of first-generation immigrants from Pakistan, became the youngest first minister of Scotland and the first Asian and Muslim to hold the office. Whatever their political views, Obama, Sunak, and Yousaf becoming president, prime minister, and first minister are historic political and cultural events which would have been unthinkable in the age of the classical theorists. However, race and racism still divide Britain and the United States. A UK government audit on race equality, for example, revealed "deeply ingrained disparities across the country,"¹ and a separate report concluded that racism continues to be "part of the daily lives" of people from ethnic minorities.² In the United States, civil rights protestor Heather Heyer was killed in 2017 when a car driven by a neo-Nazi activist rammed into a group of people protesting against a White supremacy rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 2022, there were 1,096 fatal police shootings in the United States, of whom 225 were Black Americans, which is much higher than that of any other ethnicity.³ The United States does not have a monopoly on racism in society, however. In the same year, the Ontario Human Rights Commission reported the persistence of racism in Canadian society. The deaths of Joey Knapysweet and Agnes Sutherland highlight the result

of systemic discrimination against First Nations peoples, and the courts have affirmed that racial profiling is a common occurrence in some areas, such as retail settings.⁴ Although the history of Black people in Canada and Britain has followed a different trajectory to that of the United States, issues concerning racial discrimination, exclusion, racial inequality, and racial strife have a powerful urgency in the twenty-first century.

This chapter further extends the sociological canon to make society intelligible in terms of race, through the writings of American's preeminent African American scholar, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963). His sociology was decisively shaped by the social structures in which he was embedded.⁵ For Du Bois, the structure included racial segregation and oppression. His sociology brings to prominence the issue of race that is largely invisible in sociology's classical canon drawn up by White men. He exposed deep-seated racism in American society and the close relationship between race, slavery, and capitalism through an enormous body of work spanning six decades, including books, sociological studies, autobiography, poetry, essays, short stories, and political commentary. Du Bois is best known in sociology for his early works, *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996) and *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1994), in which he discusses the interplay of race and class in American society. However, Du Bois was a social theorist, a political activist, and a prominent member of the early Black protest intelligentsia largely responsible for analyzing race and racism and envisioning a new social order.⁶ As such, he was an iconic leader who influenced other Black intellectuals and activists in the Black Freedom Movement. Du Bois's sociology is multifaceted and remains influential within contemporary sociology as well as other disciplines. The chapter begins by examining the context that shaped his life and works and proceeds by examining some of his central concepts, in particular his analysis of the interplay between capitalism, race, and racism and his work on the double-consciousness and cultural hybridity.

LIFE AND WORKS

W.E.B. Du Bois was born in 1868 in rural Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He was the only son of Mary Silva Burghardt, a domestic servant, and Alfred Du Bois, a barber and itinerant laborer of Haitian

descent. Although he had a privileged education compared to the vast majority of African Americans, at an early age he experienced rampant racism. He studied at Fisk University and later at Harvard University, with a spell at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin in 1892 and 1893. He was the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard. His sophisticated analysis of race and racism was controversial; he was excluded from the canonized process in sociology and, despite his distinctive contribution to sociological theory at a time when the university system in America was expanding at an unparalleled rate, he was denied a full-time academic position at the Ivy League schools.⁷ Du Bois died, with ironic timing, in Accra, Ghana, in 1963, just hours before Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington, DC. His career problems were, in addition to racial discrimination, partly due to his tireless political activism. In 1905, Du Bois cofounded the Niagara Movement, a civil rights organization, which challenged the more accommodating and subservient policies of Black educator Booker T. Washington. In 1910, when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established, he edited its monthly publication, *The Crisis*, the most influential Black political journal of its time.⁸ Over the years, Du Bois visited the Soviet Union and joined the Communist Party of America.

His passport was revoked for years, his books were widely banned from American libraries, the FBI harassed him, and he was arrested for “subversive” activities in 1951. Despite being vilified by American social elites, Du Bois attained international recognition for his intellectual and political leadership among anticolonial intellectuals in Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa, and China.

We have followed the traditional approach among British (e.g., Giddens, 1971), Canadian (e.g., Zeitlin, 1968), and American (e.g., Nisbet, 1970) sociologists to contend that social theory was in large part a response to the historically unique chemistry of economic and social transformations in Western Europe.⁹ In Du Bois’s case, his social theory was written during what are arguably the three most significant socioeconomic crises in the history of America: the internal migration of Black workers from the rural southern states to the urban North in the decades following the Civil War (1861–5); the industrialization of the economy along with the mass influx of European immigrants; and

the growth of the Civil Rights movement. In addition, his sociology is indubitably related in complex ways to global events such as the rise of socialism in Europe and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 that inspired the development of radical politics inside America, and to national events such as legalized racial segregation and the growth of membership of America's most notorious "terrorist organization," the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁰

Through racial vignettes and poetry Du Bois showed that racism took different forms: bigotry and discrimination in the North and disenfranchisement and mob lynching in the South. The virulence and horror of racism in the South is illustrated by one statistic: between 1900 and 1935 there were an estimated 1,374 lynchings, that is, an average of 39 per year.¹¹ During his long life, the United States was involved in four global wars: World War I (1914–18), World War II (1939–45), the Korean War (1950–3), and the Vietnam War (1959–75). Assessing these developments, Manning Marable wrote, "These turbulent social currents impacted Du Bois as an intellectual and as an important leader of opinion of an oppressed people."¹²

As an academic and opinion leader, Du Bois authored more than 1,900 works of one sort or another including books, essays, poems, and opinion pieces.¹³ In 1896, he was appointed as assistant instructor at the University of Pennsylvania to do research on the Black community in Philadelphia. The research resulted in his first book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, a classic ethnographic study that established the field of urban sociology. From 1897 to 1910, he taught sociology at Atlanta University. During this period, he published the first of his autobiographical memoirs, *The Souls of Black Folk*. From 1910 to 1943, he edited *The Crisis*, and in its pages authored many essays on a wide range of issues



Photo 14.1. W.E.B. Du Bois was born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. His books were widely banned from American libraries. An intellectual leader in the American Black movement, he was forcibly retired from Atlanta University in 1944. He moved to Accra, Ghana, where he died in 1963.

on the state of African Americans. He also authored the second of his autobiographical memoirs, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* ([1920] 1999). After thirty-three years editing *The Crisis*, he returned to Atlanta University and published *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* ([1935] 1998), which offered a revision of Marx's theory of class consciousness and class struggle. Du Bois stayed at Atlanta University until 1944, when he was forcibly retired by senior administration.

Du Boisian sociology is multidimensional, historical, and socioculturally sensitive. For Du Bois, a social problem transcends its immediate locale but is ever intertwined in complex ways between history, social condition, and social action. In 1898 he wrote: "It is not *one* problem, but rather a plexus of social problems ... and these problems have their one bond of unity in the act that they group themselves about those Africans whom two centuries of slave-trading brought into the land."¹⁴ Thus, his classic analysis of the African diaspora in America made the distinction between the personal problems of milieu and the societal issues of social structure. In this sense, Du Bois possessed what C. Wright Mills legendarily called a "sociological imagination."¹⁵ His scholarship is grounded in his experience of life in America within "the Veil," the famous metaphor he used to symbolize the specter of American apartheid and racism. In *Souls*, he wrote: "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?"

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Du Bois studied with leading scholars at Harvard University. During his time at Harvard, he describes how the intellectual milieu caused him to "turn ... 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."¹⁶ At Harvard, Du Bois had little exposure to Marx's work.¹⁷ He took inspiration from Marx's anticolonialism, and the strong anti-imperialist stance taken by the Russian Bolsheviks. He wrote, "I believe in the dictum of Karl Marx, that the economic foundation of a nation is widely decisive for its politics, in art and its culture."¹⁸ The influence of Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* is evident

in the following declaration to the Africa and Pan-African Movement: “You have nothing to lose but your Chains!”¹⁹ The mature Du Bois adopted a Marxian view that, ultimately, “without the overthrow of capitalist monopoly the Negro cannot survive in the United States as a self-respecting cultural unit.”²⁰

The radicalization of Du Bois, from a cautious critic to a militant activist, is attributed to William M. Trotter (1872–1934), Du Bois’s Harvard class peer.²¹ As was the fashion in the late nineteenth century among other early American sociologists, however, Du Bois visited European universities, and his early scholarship does reflect his sojourn at the Friedrich Wilhelm University. As a student of Gustav Schmoller (1838–1917), Du Bois drew from the philosophical tradition of Hegelian phenomenology²² and adopted Durkheimian positivism. He wrote, “I ... began to grasp the idea of a world of human beings whose actions, like those of the physical world, were subject to law.”²³ Another intellectual influence was Max Weber. Like Weber, Du Bois recognizes the importance of “value-free” research. However, his work had origins independent of the impulses of Western liberal and radical thought.²⁴ Thus, the majority of his essays did not exhibit a value-free perspective, a feature he shared with Marx. The mature Du Bois denounces the “wicked conquest” of “darker” races by White races, but “with the purpose of saving both them and world civilization from themselves.”²⁵ As Levering Lewis opines, although Du Bois “professed a commitment to objective social science, he was temperamentally incapable of neutrality.”²⁶

AMERICAN CAPITALISM, IDEOLOGY, AND RACE

The transformation of the United States, from an agrarian frontier society to an industrial and military global superpower that dislodged Britain as the world’s hegemonic industrial nation, provided the empirical backdrop to Du Bois’s analysis of race and his sociology. In 1840 America was predominantly an agricultural society with less than 10 percent of the labor force employed in manufacturing.²⁷ Over four decades, a period when “Dead Indians are a common feature,”²⁸ the “frontier” was privatized, a national railroad system was established, and Aboriginal peoples were relocated on reservations as White settlers developed

the West. As one observer put it, “in less than fifty years an isolationist, agrarian society transformed itself into an internationally aggressive, economically imperialist, industrial nation.”²⁹ Economic growth served to reinforce the idea that America was the “land of opportunity” for all, regardless of class. The national ideology was popularized by terms such as “the American Dream,” in spite of its contradiction. As Stephen Edgell argues, “Notwithstanding ... this ‘dream’ was flawed from the outset by virtue of the ethnic cleansing of the continent’s native peoples in less than four centuries and the institution of slavery and can be shown to be empirically suspect.”³⁰ That race and racism played a central role in early US modernity cannot be overemphasized.

With the exception of Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), early sociologists in America tended to celebrate rather than critique the triumph of American capitalism.³¹ Like Marx, Du Bois was highly critical of colonialism that, in essence, believed “[i]t is the duty of white Europe to divide up the darker world and administer it for Europe’s good.”³² *Darkwater* emphasized that colonialism and racial inequality cannot be understood without analyzing the role of ideology. The ideology of “White supremacy” was a relatively recent social construct associated with legitimizing colonialism and slavery. The ideas among the dominant and oppressing elite were that

[d]arker peoples are dark in mind as well as in body; of dark, uncertain, and imperfect descent; of frailer, cheaper stuff; they are cowards in the face of mausers and maxims; they have no feelings, aspirations, and loves; they are fools, illogical idiots – “half-devil and half-child.”³³

This leads Du Bois to assert that these ideas have penetrated into the national psyche with a thoroughness that few realized: “Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is ‘white’; everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable is ‘yellow’; a bad taste is ‘brown’; and the devil is ‘black.’”³⁴ In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois identified the fundamental contradiction in American history:

From the day of its birth, the anomaly of slavery plagued a nation which asserted the equality of all men and sought to derive powers of government from the consent of the governed.³⁵

For Du Bois, American slavery was a subsystem of world capitalism.³⁶ Although Du Bois privileged race, as Lemert rightly observes, his most distinctive theoretical conviction was that race never stands alone, separate from economic realities.³⁷

In *The Philadelphia Negro* Du Bois built up a meticulous picture of how African Americans survived the social effects of mass immigration, industrialization, and race discrimination. Importantly, he directly linked the low economic class and status of African Americans to mass immigration, world capitalism, and racism. In his prose:

Everyone knows that in a city like Philadelphia a Negro does not have the same chances to exercise his [*sic*] ability or secure work according to his talents as a white man ... [W]ork open to Negroes are not only restricted by their own lack of training but also by discrimination against them on account of their race.³⁸

Weber's influence is most evident in Du Bois's analysis of African Americans' "life chances." He argued that African Americans are disadvantaged because they lacked the relevant training and skills for the new factory work. For Du Bois, economic exploitation was difficult to disentangle from racial oppression. The economic exploitation facing African Americans was rooted in the legacy of enslavement.

The ideas of Du Bois provide theoretical space for examining the interplay of class and race, the intersection of racial segregation and poverty. According to Du Bois, Black Americans' exclusion from the new industries was mostly attributed, explicitly and implicitly, to White Americans' prejudice and structural racism, but Du Bois develops a more structural theory of class, race, and poverty. Whereas in *Conditions* Engels saw the Industrial Revolution developing "a definite class," in *Capital* Marx envisioned the new working class developing a "class consciousness," and in *Economy and Society* Weber called attention to the distinction between class and status, in *The Philadelphia Negro* Du Bois pioneered the way toward further "complexifying" class by emphasizing that race-based discrimination divides the working class, which results in economic self-harm and acts as a barrier to developing liberating social movements. Race-based discrimination took different forms, in some cases by direct discrimination when, for example,

“White” was listed as a qualification for entry into a particular trade. In other cases, Black workers were excluded from manual trades because White workers simply refused to work alongside non-union workers, but they also refused to let Black workers join the union. In most cases, writes Du Bois, unions “invariably fail to admit a colored applicant except under pressing circumstances.”³⁹

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois analyzed the interlocking constructs of class exploitation, class struggle, and racism. For Du Bois, the American “White” class struggle had been effectively distorted and thwarted by the ideological power of racism and the seductiveness of the myth of the “American Dream.”⁴⁰ He argued that race never stands alone, and exclusion therefore had an economic motive that impacted the labor market. Du Bois observed:

So today the workmen plainly see that a large amount of competition can be shut off by taking advantage of public opinion and drawing the color-line. Moreover, in this there is one thoroughly justifiable consideration that plays a great part: namely, the Negroes are used to low wages – can live on them, and consequently would fight less fiercely than most whites against reduction.⁴¹

In this anarchy, working-class African Americans are reduced to laboring for a pittance or abject poverty when unemployed. It is in *Souls*, however, that we find one of the most powerful statements on the interplay of class exploitation and race. Here, Du Bois cites the ruminations of an old Southern Black man: “White man sit down whole year; Nigger work day and night and make crop; Nigger hardly gits bread and meat; white man sittin’ down gits all. *It’s wrong*.”⁴² That race-based discriminations and class-based exploitation are central to an understanding of early American capitalism is another of Du Bois’s contribution to social theory. He was among the first sociologists to document that the economic progress of the American working class as a whole was held back because of racism; that racism thwarted working-class consciousness and organization. Du Bois offers a complex model of class. In Weberian sociology, African Americans exemplify the interplay of class and status, but Du Bois’s pioneering contribution was to emphasize the historical embeddedness of racial status, which is entwined with but distinct from class.

RACE AND THE CLASSIC VEIL

In contrast to the other classical theorists we have discussed, Du Bois's sociology privileged race. Race was, of course, at the root of what he famously called the "Negro Problem," or the antipathies and frictions between White and Black Americans resulting from the social segregation – the "color-line" – of the races. In *Souls* his focus was the rupture of nearly all social relations between Black and White in the United States in general, and in the South in particular, which, despite some changes in economic and civil affairs, left that "frightful chasm at the color-line across which men pass at their peril" to remain.⁴³ Du Bois, however, came to see racial segregation as a global phenomenon and called for "the British Negro, the French Negro, and the American Negro to rise."⁴⁴ His broader international focus on race led to an increasing number of polemical essays on world human rights.⁴⁵

For Du Bois, the human-invented concept of "race" as a deeply historical and social construct functioned as a key part of his sociology and political writings, from the struggle against segregation and structured racism to class exploitation to self-identity to Pan-African politics. As we discussed in [chapter 1](#), race as a social construct was conceived during the colonial and transatlantic slavery era. The evolution of the concept of "race" is deeply connected with two other terms, "slave" and "White." These words were all used by Europeans in the 1500s, and during European colonial expansion into North America.⁴⁶ According to Sundquist (1996), Du Bois never quite discarded the prevailing nineteenth-century view that race alluded to biological distinctions and nationhood. In an early polemical essay, "The Conservation of Races" (1897), Du Bois speaks of the universal prevalence of the "race spirit" and its importance for nation building, arguing that the "history of the world is the history, not of individuals ... but of races."⁴⁷ This is followed by his definition of race: "a vast 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."⁴⁸ However, in an essay published forty years later, Du Bois acknowledges that his earlier ideas of race contained "irreconcilable tendencies" and discusses his own intellectual evolution on the conception of race, which emphasized the cultural aspects of race.⁴⁹

Du Boisian sociology is grounded in his formative experience growing up in racially polarized America. In *Souls* he presents new theoretical constructs for interpreting African American identity: “the Veil,” “two-ness,” and “double-consciousness.” In the opening pages, he describes that first childhood epiphany that race difference matters and makes mention for the first time of “the Veil,” the most famous figure of speech he used to symbolize American apartheid. He wrote:

It is the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first burst upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards – ten cents a package – and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows.⁵⁰

His goal is to raise the veil or venture behind it, in order to allow White Americans to “listen” to the souls of African Americans. He writes, “Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that way 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.”⁵¹ In *Darkwater*, he wrote this canonic passage:

And then – the Veil. 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 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 God. 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 these Voices from within the Veil, for they portray the most human hurt of the Twentieth Cycle of that poor Jesus who was called the Christ.⁵²

There is broad consensus that the “Veil” is a metaphor for racial division that divides and separates White and African Americans, as a symbol for structured racism and social exclusion, which profoundly shape the dynamic of perceptions and interactions between those divided.⁵³ Du Bois constantly reasserts the importance of the veil to understand the psychological and social effects on African Americans of the myriad forms of racial stigmatization and racial injustice. Foremost, it figured prominently in his early theory of race relations and underscored more vividly his premise that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.”⁵⁴ The imagery of the veil is one of a transparent membrane through which Blacks collectively view Whites across the racial divide. Despite the transparency of the veil, despite the ease with which each race can see through it, the racial vortex acts to deafen the voices from within the veil and acts to separate the races.

The veil is better conceived as a “thought-thing” or as a collection of ideas, rather than as an artifact. In this sense, it filters and organizes information that is communicated across the divided societies, a process in which Whites and Blacks act to exchange perceptions, to shape their own identities, and ultimately to dictate the course of their education, their employment aspirations, their lives. It is through this socialization process, of course, that Whites and Blacks learn to become members of society, both by internalizing societal mores, norms, and values, and also by learning to perform their social roles at each side of the racial divide. As a cognitive process, consisting of discourse, thoughts, and metaphors of culture, the veil is clearly a social construct, invented or made rather than naturally given, that is inherited during childhood and that during formative years deeply affects what they think of themselves and the “other.”



Photo 14.2. Du Bois's veil is a metaphor for the racial division that divides White and African Americans, as a symbol for structured racism. The horror of racism in the South is illustrated by one statistic: between 1900 and 1935 there were an estimated 1,374 lynchings – an average of 39 per year.

In *Souls* Du Bois explains through a myriad of racial vignettes that what characterizes Whites “without the Veil” is a “blindness” to the inveterate effects on Blacks “within the Veil” of the “color-line” drawn by the collective complicity, whether active or passive, of American Whites.⁵⁵ Finally, because the veil is an intangible, emotional, deep-rooted “thought-thing,” it is a social phenomenon that is not easily lifted. Although it will not happen anytime soon or without struggle, Du Bois believes that the worlds within and outside the veil are undergoing change, and someday America shall shear the veil and “the prisoned shall go free.”⁵⁶

RACE AND THE DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

Du Bois's most influential sociological concept is the “double-consciousness,” the reality that the African American self is complexly

constituted and has a duality to it. The African American see herself or himself through the eyes of others, and this reflective self has two souls, two thoughts in one body. For African Americans, therefore, the self is divided, and each individual experiences “two-ness” – the dual life of “an American, a Negro” but rooted in a complex sensibility, that is, double-consciousness. Closely related to the concept of the veil, it is the underlying theme in *Souls*. The Black person of his or her era knows how he or she is perceived – the objectified and excluded Other – and who she or he truly is – the knowing and agential self. The two may coexist divided from each other, but ultimately, they come together to define his or her identity. The pivotal concept of the double self with a double-consciousness is embedded in this passage:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense 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 his two-ness – 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.⁵⁷

The passage reveals a complex paradox about Du Bois’s double-consciousness. On the one hand, the first sentence portrays the African American’s double-consciousness as a gift. In folklore in many cultures, a “seventh son” or child is especially lucky. The phrase “born with the veil” or “born with a caul” refers to a baby born with a part of the membrane of the amniotic sac covering its face. Since medieval times the appearance of a caul at birth was superstitiously regarded as a lucky sign: it endowed the child with special powers. African Americans were therefore gifted, not afflicted, with “second-sight,” meaning they could see things denied to others, see through guise and guile. Thus, double-consciousness gave African Americans not insignificant power by affording them unique insight into stratified societies as a whole.⁵⁸ Black Americans were “outsiders” looking in. Separated by the veil, they

were both inside and outside of the dominant White society. Du Bois posits that Whites have limited understanding of Blacks, whereas Blacks have a profound understanding of the cultural architecture that Whites employ to oppress and exclude them.⁵⁹

Du Bois's narrative in *Souls* resonates with Hegel's master-slave dialectic, a tension between bodily and spiritual selves.⁶⁰ Parallel with Hegel's *Phenomenology*, he suggests that the virulence of racism constricts White American self-consciousness, but, by contrast, the effects of racism strengthen and shape African American identity and self. The concluding sentence, on the other hand, makes it clear that Blacks bear the burden of two-ness and conveys the affliction and despair arising necessarily from the degradations visited upon African Americans in the post-emancipation era.⁶¹ A sense of underachievement, of "being torn under," prevents the double self, developing into a better and truer self.⁶²

Du Bois contends that a Black American male strives "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 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."⁶³ The double struggle of African Americans, on the one hand to escape White contempt and hatred, and on the other hand to do only low-paid remedial work, generates tension that manifests itself in all kinds of social pathologies within the Black community. He puts it like this: "This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds ... has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves."⁶⁴ Structured racism meant that compared to other New World emancipation, African Americans in the southern states gained least from the abolition of slavery.⁶⁵ Du Bois was highly critical of early sociologists on the "other side" of the veil, suggesting they problematized the characteristic and behavior of Blacks: "But alas! While sociologists gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes, the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair."⁶⁶ It is plausible to conclude that the despairing passage on the double self is a guiding thread weaving throughout the sociological projects that occupied much of Du Bois's work over his lifetime.

The intellectual roots of Du Bois's veil and double-consciousness are widely debated. It is suggested that between 1892 and 1894, Weber help forge intellectual bonds between Du Bois and George Herbert Mead and Georg Simmel.⁶⁷ There are evident similarities between *Souls* and early contributions to the self-theory found in Charles Cooley's *Human Nature and Social Order* (1902), George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), and Georg Simmel's ([1908] 1971) essay on the Stranger. In *Human Nature*, Cooley proposes that people are not socially real unless someone is actually conscious of them. He posits that if a person went into a foreign country and hid himself or herself so well that no one knew he or she was there, he or she would have no social existence for the inhabitants. This ethereal view of society is the essence of the veil – figuratively it renders Blacks nonexistent in the collective minds of White Americans.

At Harvard, Du Bois was a student of the social psychologist William James. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), James's own double-self theory uses the *I/me* distinction that is popularly associated with Mead. It is plausible to conclude that James had a "direct" influence on Du Bois's double self, although he refined it and took it in a different direction. From the White side of the veil, in *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead writes, "The unity of and the structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole."⁶⁸ For Mead, the self is something that is reflexive. The Du Boisian double-self concept is sensitive to history and to the primacy of power.

In *The Philosophy of Money*, published three years before *Souls*, the German sociologist Georg Simmel produced a much more fluid self. This quote captures his argument: "The enigmatic unity of the soul cannot be grasped by the cognitive process directly, but only when broken down into multitude of strands, the resynthesis of which signifies the unique personality."⁶⁹ For Simmel then, the metropolis and the self are intimately bound up with the conditions of the money economy. From a Du Boisian perspective, structured racism adds a complexity to the "multitudes of strands" that signify the self. There are clear parallels between Du Bois's social theory of the self and Simmel's essay on the stranger. In every human relationship, proposes Simmel, there is a pattern: "the distance within this relationship indicates that one who is close by is remote, but this strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near."⁷⁰ The African American, then, like the stranger, is in a

paradoxical position: physically near to the White group but psychologically and culturally distant at the same time.

Du Bois's distinctive theory of the self presents a more nuanced conception of the inner life of African Americans; it suggests a tapestry consisting of multiple strands of the self, a multidimensional perspective embedded in its historical-cultural foundation. For self-theory scholars, Du Bois's double self is conceptually powerful: "There is no universal self. There are only selves. White sociology has been looking under the dim light of its own cultural blindness, looking thereby in the wrong place for some universal social thing that, from Du Bois's point of view, does not exist."⁷¹ If Du Bois had been included into the sociology canon, self-theorists would surely have concluded that Simmel's stranger likely suffered from double-consciousness. To African Americans, social hierarchy and White American power are exactly the sources of racism from which double-consciousness manifested.

CRITICISMS

Although Du Bois made a distinctive contribution to our understanding of the role race played in the dehumanization of African Americans and provided a much more nuanced and complex picture of the components of the social self in particular, his uncompromising language and political activism exposed him as an easy target for his professional peers. As he himself acknowledges to the reader, "I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil."⁷² If we leave aside the intellectual climate stoked by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and, later in his career, by the Cold War and the politics of "McCarthyism," many contemporary White reviewers were deeply disturbed by his early publication, *Darkwater*. One reviewer opined that "Dr. Du Bois is too close to the struggle to see clearly the problems involved. His work is a creation of *passion* rather than intelligence."⁷³ One reviewer found in *Darkwater* "a remarkable example of that elemental race-hatred which [Du Bois] himself so fiercely denounces."⁷⁴ Eric Sundquist has suggested that Du Bois's prose was "culturally coded, almost subliminal language" that challenged the ability of his readers, whether White or Black, to comprehend his work.⁷⁵

Du Bois's position, however, is aligned with contemporary feminist and postmodernist thinking, which rejects the notion of "value-free" thinking as an illusion. Contemporary feminists argue that social researchers are deeply implicated with the values and the communities from which they emanated and with which they empathize. For example, although her academic training was designed to alienate her from her community, American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins writes, "Instead of viewing the everyday as a negative influence on my theorizing, I tried to see how the everyday actions and ideas of the Black women in my life reflected the theoretical issues I claimed were so important to them."⁷⁶ An oft-made criticism is that much of Du Bois's scholarship can be interpreted as elitist. This allegation is buttressed by his declaration in *The Philadelphia Negro* that the "aristocracy of the Negro population" are key actors within the African American community that must lead people in a rational direction.⁷⁷ He appears uncritically to embrace ideas of expert knowledge as a cure for deleterious social consequences of racial segregation and racial prejudice, not recognizing the limits of expertise for contributing to final emancipation when detached from democratic social movements. By the 1930s, however, Du Bois understood his earlier position to be "ideologically reactionary."⁷⁸

In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois provides the first survey of African American working-class conditions but, written at the beginning of his academic career, it lacks the general analysis of capitalism found in Engels's *Conditions*. He tends to believe that the White business class should initiate "social reform" in order to diversify Black employment and to afford "escape from remedial employment."⁷⁹ When Du Bois declares that it is wrong "to make scullions of engineers," he can be criticized for advancing a moral argument and failing to develop a theory of American capitalism. However, Du Bois made an important contribution to Marx's concept of contradiction. In *Black Reconstruction in America*, rather than analyzing the rise of American capitalism through Marx's theoretical prism – that is, the contradiction between the modes and relations of production – Du Bois argued that capitalism and slavery were related systemically, "made possible by the ideologies of racism."⁸⁰ Moreover, from the vantage point of an African American, the absence of a study of racism in Marx's theory of history "left a monumental gap in the analysis of capitalism."⁸¹

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, North American and British societies were forged by colonial attitudes in its assumptions of the empire's subjects and omissions. Race as a social construct really matters as it denies or gives benefits and privileges. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1977) examines the reductive assumptions scholars make in the North Atlantic West about the civilizations and people beyond Europe. The purpose of cultural disparagement, Said observes, was to regulate and confine the non-European to "a secondary racial, cultural, ontological status."⁸² In *Empireland* (2021), author Sathnam Sanghera argues that an empire mentality is still deeply entrenched at all levels of British society. The most controversial of all the modern legacies is racism. As the English writer Salman Rushdie has posited, four centuries of being told Whites are superior leave their stain, and "[t]his stain has seeped into every part of the [British] culture, the language and daily life; and nothing much has been done to wash it out."⁸³ Sanghera, in Britain, notes that the inheritance of empire has "morphed into nothing less than a willful, unapologetic exercise in white racial supremacy."⁸⁴

We have, however, examined Du Bois through White eyes and filtered through the lenses of our greater familiarity with Western European, compared with classical American, writers and sensibilities. Du Bois's sociology is irrefutably preoccupied with American social, political, and cultural issues, such as, for example, anti-Black racism in the context of slavery, lynching, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and other forms of racial oppression in the United States.⁸⁵ The personal orbit in which he experienced structured racism – outside and inside academia – is undoubtedly relevant to understanding Du Bois's legacy. Racial segregation and oppression led Du Bois and other Black sociologists to develop a political advocacy sociology that addressed pressing issues of their era and ours.⁸⁶ In Europe and North America, the idea that humanity was divided by "race" penetrated the dominant ideology of the period almost as deeply as "progress" itself. Prolific Swedish author Sven Lindqvist, for example, observes that nineteenth-century intellectual thought served the European imperial project, which, without doubt, shaped American modernity.⁸⁷

Du Bois's social theory illuminates the interplay of colonization, class, and race, the intersection of racial segregation and social inequality and

injustice. The *leitmotif* of *Souls* is to unmask American racism and its effects on metropolitan Black identity. In *Darkwater* the role of the ideology of “White supremacy” as a social construct to legitimize colonization and slavery is exposed. His early sociology focuses on microsocial interactions and differentiation based on race, rather than on “metanarratives” promulgated by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. From this perspective, Du Bois’s intellectual lineage can be located within the distinctly American “micro-interactionist tradition.”⁸⁸ The veil and the double-self concepts are Du Bois’s best-known contributions to social theory and, arguably, he played a disproportionately influential role in developing the twentieth-century definition of race as a “fundamental axis of social organization in the US.”⁸⁹ Applying Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, Du Bois argues that African Americans develop a greater understanding of their own identity because of the life experience of racism behind the veil.

The effect of excluding *Souls* from the sociological canon caused blindness among White sociologists, for they, too, did not see clearly beyond the veil. Indeed, as others have argued, the exclusion of Du Bois’s intellectual thoughts, so long obscured by White academics, invites reconsideration of sociology’s research and teaching on race and cultural identity in North America.⁹⁰ In twentieth-century postcolonial sociological thought the “grand” narratives of the “classic” epoch were “fundamentally incomplete” and “fatally flawed” because they neglect colonization by the West and the role of exploitation of conquered territories played in establishing capitalist modernity. Du Boisian sociology therefore can be interpreted as “a corrective that displaces the neatly contained story of evolutionary transformation for one of relational gain and dispossession – not as a temporary phase of say, primitive accumulation, but as a permanent condition.”⁹¹ In the twenty-first century, Du Bois’s pioneering insights are highly relevant to theories of social construction, critical race theory,⁹² and Black sociology, in its expressly normative commitment to using social science to eliminate racism and promote racial inequality.⁹³

Finally, it is a tribute to Du Bois’s work that Black American feminists have drawn from his sociological vision. Patricia Hill Collins’s epistemological approach,⁹⁴ for example, is clearly consistent with the Du Boisian tradition, and her work on “the outside within” has strong resemblances to Du Bois’s thinking on double-consciousness. Over 125 years after *The Philadelphia Negro* was published, “racial terror and

violence” continue to be a central part of the African American story.⁹⁵ On both sides of the Atlantic, Black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities continue to call for society to be free of racial discrimination.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 What did Du Bois mean by “double-consciousness”? To what extent does this remain a feature of racial identities today?
- 2 Compare and contrast Du Bois’s theory of the oppression of African Americans with Perkins Gilman’s theory of the oppression of women.
- 3 Is the classical canon color-blind? Why or why not?

15

Georg Simmel on Modernity

Georg Simmel's method is to see the whole through the parts. His celebrated premise was the mental experience of modernity and life in large cities or metropolises, an experience that he considers to be both a philosophical problem and a sociological question.¹ Simmel is observant to the seemingly unimportant nuances of the psychology of everyday metropolitan life, such as everyday social interaction. He published a formidable body of work in social criticism as well as a plethora of highly original essays on the arts and artists in European cultural history.² His writings embrace ambiguity and contradiction. David Frisby, a leading interpreter of Simmel's writings, posits that "no sociologist before him had sought to capture the modes of experiencing modern life nor the fleeting moments of interaction." Recent decades have seen Simmel's canonical status in American sociology solidify as his concepts have become "an anchor" in urban sociology and conflict scholarship.³

In this chapter, we foreground some central topics from Simmel's publications, in particular, his perspective on the nature and structural properties of social interaction, social types, money, and life in modern cities.

LIFE AND WORKS

Georg Simmel was born in 1858 in Berlin, Germany. Although both of Simmel's parents were baptized Christians, their origins were Jewish, and he experienced antisemitism. After his father's death, a wealthy businessman left him a substantial inheritance, so his academic earnings were relatively unimportant to him. He completed his doctoral studies in philosophy at the University of Berlin. His analysis of modernity was unorthodox, and he was considered an outsider in the academy, not gaining a full-time professorship until 1914 at the University of Strasbourg. Simmel died of liver cancer in 1918. There were several factors responsible for Simmel's slow progress in the academy. Antisemitism, which was openly expressed in German society and in the academic institutions, was a factor, as was Simmel's unconventional approach to academic work and his disregard of academic etiquette.⁴ He has been described as an "unsystematic theorist."⁵ David Beer describes Simmel's writing style as "dense prose penetrated with bursts of clarity."⁶

Many of Simmel's topics seem trivial compared to the grand sweep of historical-comparative research favored in German university circles. American sociologist Lewis Coser describes Simmel as "an intellectual coquette, engaged in a high form of literary play."⁷ Elizabeth Goodstein observes that the range of Simmel's oeuvre partly explains why Simmel possibly could not be elevated to a "classic" in the canonical sense.⁸ Despite these idiosyncrasies, or even because of them, Simmel's lectures were popular with both students and the cultural elites of Berlin. He stood at the crossroads of many intellectual circles and enjoyed the freedom of belonging to many groups but being held by none. His sociology is "undoubtedly tied to the Berlin milieu."⁹ His home was a regular meeting place for a select society of artists, writers, and intellectuals, including Max Weber and Marianne Weber.¹⁰

Simmel published more than 30 books, and innumerable scholarly papers and newspaper opinion pieces. These include *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), *Sociology* (1908), *Fundamental Questions of Sociology* (1917), *The View of Life* (1918), and essays such as "The Metropolis & Mental Life" and "The Stranger." After 1900 Simmel pivoted increasingly to nonacademic writing.¹¹ Much of his substantive work is

focused on formal sociology, a kind of spatial geometry of social relations, and also a kind of mathematical treatment of the effect of numbers on social forms. He writes about social types that emerge in interaction, such as the stranger, the adventurer, and the pauper. His most influential writings are *The Philosophy of Money* and the closely related essay, “The Metropolis.” All of his works deal with the struggle of individual subjectivity – the individual personality – to integrate, master, and transcend the objective and objectifying culture of modern society.



Photo 15.1. Georg Simmel was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1858. His analysis of modernity was unorthodox, and he was considered an “outsider” in the academy. He died of cancer in 1918.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Simmel was an intellectual contemporary of Ferdinand Tönnies, and had a long friendship with Heinrich John Rickert, a German philosopher and renowned neo-Kantian.¹² His writings particularly reflect the paradigms of the philosophers Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Neo-Kantianism influenced his conception of the human mind as an active rather than passive object. Simmel goes beyond Kant in searching for specifically *sociological* meanings and for sociological first principles or *apriorities*.¹³ In Simmel’s terms, the fundamental social *apriority* is the life force. The social is emergent when human beings respond to the demands of their inner life force. He writes, “Neither hunger nor love ... signify socialization. On the contrary, they constitute it only when they shape the isolated side-by-sidedness of the individuals into definite forms of with-and-for-one-another, which belong under the general concept of reciprocity.”¹⁴

Simmel formulated a micro-sociological version of Hegel’s dialectic. For Simmel, dialectical change occurs as social phenomena or thoughts develop until what is *other* in them emerges. At this point, the other challenges its origin until a new synthesis is produced,

which will, in turn, be transcended. This dialectic, unlike that of Hegel or Marx, allows for many sources of interaction and an indeterminate outcome. In this, it is more like the postmodern ideas of Michel Foucault than like the theories of Marx. As Goodstein observes, Simmel's social theory is influenced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: "Simmel's metaphysical relativism and emphasis on the perspectival nature of truth and his distinctive approach to ethics are clearly Nietzschean in inspiration."¹⁵ Along with Nietzsche, Simmel celebrates the ambiguity and diversity of human life and acknowledges the limits of rationality on society and human behavior. By showing that erratic self is primary features of urban life, Simmel extends Nietzsche's arguments and offers a far more nuanced theory of modernity.

SIMMEL'S METHODOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

According to Simmel, sociology "contains no subject matter not already treated in one of the existing sciences." Sociology "only proposes a new *way* for all of them" – a way that involves a process of abstraction similar to induction. He argues: "Sociology rests its whole right of existence as a separate science upon this abstraction of the forms of society ... The subject-matter of sociology is, therefore, the forms or ways in which human beings exist besides, for, and with each other."¹⁶ Simmel isolates two dimensions of sociological investigation: the longitudinal and the cross-sectional. The first, he writes, "follows the longitudinal direction of a particular evolution." The second dimension provides "a cross-sectional view of such evolutions, which ... lays bare by induction that which is common to them all, the social forms, as such."¹⁷ The central task is to isolate social forms from the onrush of impressions and details.

Simmel's sociological methodology is akin to induction theorizing. He would present each object (form, content, type) in terms of its social elements, then assess these in a kind of sociological deconstruction that removed distracting details and left only the elements of form: inside-outside, superordination-subordination, and boundary-bridge. It is not an easy methodology to practice or to teach. Simmel was not a theorist with a grand narrative that envisioned revolution, in the

way of Marx. And, in contrast to Durkheim, he regarded statistics as “purely parallel phenomena” rather than as evidence of social facts. Simmel writes, “We ... confuse statistical similarities and synchronisms of a purely individual nature with those which can be referred back to the real principle of society [which is] the reciprocity of cause.”¹⁸ Simmel’s methodology can be interpreted as an attempt to safeguard his autonomy: “For Simmel, any method imposed on a member by a scientific community binds that member and restricts his ability to articulate his individuality.”¹⁹

Simmel’s thinking was both “vitalistic” and dialectical. *Vitalism* in this context holds that, when something exists, it becomes self-emergent. The acorn contains within it the oak tree. Human beings contain within them the potential for sociality. In his time, theory was divided about whether society was real and organic (sociological realism) or, conversely, an unreal abstraction (sociological nominalism) because only individuals are real. Both Marx and Durkheim believe society to be real and to exist *sui generis*, meaning that they conceived of society as an emergent level of reality that is analytically independent from individuals and, therefore, subject to processes that can be understood only with reference to other social forces. Simmel argues that neither society nor the individual could constitute itself. Each requires the other for *sociation* to occur. Society is neither an organism, as claimed by Comte, Durkheim, and Herbert Spenser,²⁰ nor a (ideal) mental construction; it has a real existence in the web of reciprocal effects (interactions) among people and between people and their environment.

Central to Simmel’s sociology are four core concepts: form, reciprocity, space, and duality. The concept of social *form* refers to those aspects of human life that compel individuals into associations (sociation) with each other. The most concrete form is the urban encounter: the conditions under which the individual interacts with and within the urban setting; the most abstract is the atomized society itself. For Simmel, society is emergent when actors, prompted by life-force drives or wants, engage in reciprocal interaction. In Simmel’s words,

This interaction always arises on the basis of certain drives or for the sake of certain purposes. Erotic instincts, objective interests, religious impulses, and purposes of defense or attack, of play or gain, of aid or instruction, and countless others cause

man to live with other men, to act for them, with them, against them, and thus to arrange their conditions reciprocally – in brief, to influence others and to be influenced by them. The significance of these interactions lies in their causing the individuals who possess those instincts, interests, etc., to form a unit – precisely, a “society.”²¹

Social relationships always contain the capacity for creativity, innovation, and change. Simmel writes, “Sociation is the form (realized in innumerable different ways) in which individuals grow together into unity and within which their interests are realized. And it is on the basis of their interests ... that individuals form such unities.”²²

Simmel’s second core concept is *reciprocity*, which is often translated as social interaction but is more accurately translated as “reciprocal effects.” With this concept, Simmel recognizes that each social phenomenon has meaning only through its relationships with others. Reciprocal effects can be ephemeral and relatively inconsequential, or they can be longer lasting and give rise to social forms. For Simmel, society is neither an organism – *sociological realism* – nor an idea – *sociological idealism*. Society has an empirically real existence in the web of reciprocal ideas and reciprocal effects. Thus, he states, “Our situations develop themselves upon the basis of a reciprocal knowledge of each other, and this knowledge upon the basis of actual situations. ... [This is] one of the points at which reality and idea make their mysterious unity empirically perceptible.”²³

The third concept, *space*, refers to personal meanings one attaches to particular locations and places: “Social interaction among human beings is ... also experienced as a realization of space.”²⁴ Any spatial order from the room of a house to an urban parklet in a city – is defined by the boundary that separates inside from outside, public life from private life. This means that the properties of form and meanings are relative to the distances between individuals or things. Finally, modernity can be understood through the concept of *duality*, which might involve conflicts between opposites, such as between the individual and society. These four core concepts serve to connect the disparate nature of Simmel’s analyses of modernity.

FORMS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION: SOCIABILITY AND CONFLICT

For Simmel, sociology is the inquiry of social interactions in the urban environment, or what he called “sociation.” The concept of duality focused his attention on studying the forms of social interaction – that is, the various relatively stable “patterns” of interaction, forms of conversation, and “codes of etiquette” for entering and leaving social circles.²⁵ The basic problem of sociology, posits Simmel, was to identify pure forms of sociation, and his distinction between the content and forms of interaction led him to draw a parallel between sociology and geometry: “Geometrical abstraction investigates only the spatial forms of bodies ... Similarly, if sociology is conceived as interaction among individuals, the description of the forms of this interaction is the task of the science of society in its strictest and most essential sense.”²⁶ Each interaction can be analyzed in order to reveal the common element of sociation. For instance, interaction between employer and employee is based on a reciprocal relationship of domination and subordination. Generally speaking, Simmel considers competition as a form of struggle between opponents. Thus, the interaction between nation states, corporation, street gangs, or within or between families may all take the form of conflict. Here we highlight one of Simmel’s topics, social conflict, in order to demonstrate his sociology.

Conflict, for Simmel, is a “lack of harmony” within a relationship. As Lewis Coser has put it, Simmel’s “sociation always involves harmony *and* conflict, attraction *and* repulsion, love *and* hate.”²⁷ When conflict breaks out, Simmel says, “It is in reality the way to remove the dualism and to arrive at some form of unity, even if through the annihilation of one of the parties.”²⁸ Simmel observes that conflict serves a purpose in the stabilization of group forms. He states that “a group which was entirely centripetal and harmonious – that is, ‘unification’ merely – is not only impossible empirically, but it would also display no essential life-process and no stable structure. As the cosmos requires ‘*Liebe and Hass*,’ attraction and repulsion, in order to have a form, society likewise requires some quantitative relation of harmony and disharmony, association and dissociation, liking and disliking, in order to attain a definite formation.”²⁹

Simmel's preoccupation was with the ambivalent nature of the individual's connections to the urban environment and the dialectical tension, and "the conflict of life against form" as new experiences emerge from this conflict.³⁰ It is for such reasons that Coser, a leading theorist of social conflict, drew the important conclusion that "Simmel never dreamed of a frictionless universe, of a society from which classes and contentions among individuals and groups would be ever banned."³¹ Simmel resists Marx's idea of a final utopian synthesis. For Simmel, there can be no frictionless utopia; conflict delineates the dimensions of the human struggle for freedom, individuality, and spirituality. Relatedly, Simmel contests Marx's analysis of alienation. For Marx, alienation is rooted in capitalist production, it is a source of conflict, and resolving it requires abolishing capitalism. For Simmel, alienation is rooted in exchange, and is "inherent to the human condition ... always possible, but never necessary."³² Simmel does note that conflict within a group may increase its solidarity and bring out its strengths: finding an external enemy may strengthen the bond that members have to their group. He argues that, when this sort of circumstance happens, "each party must hate in its opponent, not its opponent merely, but at the same time the enemy of its higher sociological unity."³³

SOCIAL TYPES: "THE STRANGER"

Simmel complements his study of the forms of social interaction with a discussion of "social types." He is not interested in why individuals become a particular social type – miser, spendthrift, adventurer, stranger, or poor – but in what characterizes them as recurrently constituted social types. Like strangers, the poor may be perceived more as having certain general characteristics in common than differences dividing them, and so they are identified as a type because of association with a particular social group and the relationship of that group to others, rather than unique individuals. In Simmel's view, social types embody particularly significant things about urban life.³⁴ Strangers and the poor often experience "revulsion and distance" from other people. At different times in their lives and in particular spaces, the stranger and the poor person occupy a space typically on the outer boundaries of everyday social life.³⁵ In the metropolis the poor person may use a food bank,

or occupy a homeless shelter or a street corner, and they may also be relegated to an urban district with its own material social boundaries – a ghetto or slum. These urban spaces “erase the unique identity of the poor person while ensuring that he or she remains both settled and fixed somewhere.”³⁶

The sociological significance of the stranger, the topic of Simmel’s most well-known essay on social types, lies in the fact that, in some way or other, certain groups of people are marginalized or excluded from society. In European history, Jews experienced pervasive exclusion and violence as centuries of antisemitic Christian rhetoric intertwined with far-right nationalist extremism.³⁷ As Simmel points out, Jews were prohibited from certain professions and denied property rights and constitute an example of the stranger – both insider and outsider.³⁸ The notion of the stranger is often taken as a metaphor for Simmel himself and his exclusion from the academy. He describes the position of the stranger in the following passage:

If wandering is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conceptional opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the “stranger” presents the unity, as it were, of these two characteristics. This phenomenon too, however, reveals that spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations. The stranger is ... not ... the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather ... the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is ... the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.³⁹

Simmel’s stranger is “freer practically and theoretically; ... he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent.”⁴⁰ The stranger may also be an easy scapegoat when the group is looking for someone to blame. Thus Simmel writes that the stranger’s freedom contains “many dangerous possibilities.”⁴¹

Although in European history Jews have been strangers, Canada has its own history of strangers. Aboriginal peoples, with unique histories, languages, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices, have been treated as strangers in their own land as a legacy of colonization. In the United States, Native Americans and African Americans experience discrimination, racial segregation, and have been treated as “second-class” strangers. There are conceptual parallels with Simmel’s idea of the stranger and W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of “double-consciousness” and the “place” of African Americans.

MONEY AND THE METROPOLIS

In addition to sociability and conflict, another form of interaction discussed by Simmel is “exchange.” Simmel saw in exchange “the purest and most concentrated form of all human interactions in which serious interests are at stake.”⁴² In *Philosophy of Money*, he articulates that the problems of metropolitan life are intimately intertwined with the omnipresence of money. His treatise on money ambiguously intends to offer a philosophical understanding of life in its “totality of its meaning.” Simmel’s apriority is to interrogate how typical interactions play out in social and material relationships in the modern money economy, and how interactions take shape through life experiences.⁴³ Money can make all the difference in determining who is included or excluded, and Simmel insightfully observes that money permits for an increased frequency of social interactions and, relatedly, an increase in individual freedom: “Whoever knocks with the *taler* (silver coins) has all doors opened for him.”⁴⁴ The “problem of numbers” is an issue of concern for Simmel. As he points out, social standardization in the form of time, weights, and measures is an important basis for the rationalization and quantification of modern life. A history of money is connected to the role of debt in human society.⁴⁵ Money makes debt possible because it precisely quantifies the debt. In the human act of exchange, money reduces everything (including labor power) to a common calculation of worth: exchange value. Simmel sees money as “the frightful leveller” that “expresses all qualitative differences of things in terms of *how much?*”⁴⁶ He writes, “To the extent that money, with its colorlessness and indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all values ... it hollows

out the core of things, their peculiarities and specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair.”⁴⁷

In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel offers a far-ranging analysis of the social and psychological meanings of money in modernity. Like Marx in *Capital*, Simmel begins his analysis with a discussion of value and money. But unlike Marx, Simmel focuses primarily on exchange value. He explicitly rejects Marx’s labor theory of value. In his introduction to Simmel’s “The Price of Freedom,” Thomas Kemple, a leading interpreter of Simmel’s oeuvre, opens with a quip originating from Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde, that a cynic is a person who “knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” In contrast to Marx, Simmel, a contemporary of Wilde, offers a philosophical approach to the equation between price and value. He contends that the price of something that is “desirable” is the calculable “sacrifice” – the act of giving up something (time, services, possessions, money) that is valuable to you – the “condition of value.” Commodities or “things become valued and defined by their price *within and as a consequence of exchange*” as actors weigh their desire for the good or service in question against the amount of sacrifice required to obtain them.⁴⁸ Simmel’s philosophical viewpoint emphasizes that money provides a quantifiable standard for all exchanges and that economic value is the objectification of subjective value, which occurs through the *act of exchange*:

The technical form of economic transactions produces a realm of values that is more or less completely detached from the subjective-personal substructure. Although the individual buys because he values and wants to consume an object, his demand is expressed effectively only by an object in exchange. Thus, the subjective process ... changes to an objective, supra-personal relationship between objects.⁴⁹

Scholars suggest that there is a parallel between Durkheim’s thesis about the modern division of labor and Simmel’s rather abstract argument about value and exchange, as found in *The Philosophy of Money*. Simmel advances a novel thesis that the increase in social interactions facilitated by economic exchanges intensifies the opportunities for individual freedom: “the money economy makes possible ... a specific kind of mutual dependence which, at the same time, affords room for a maximum of

liberty.”⁵⁰ As Kemple notes, it’s not simply the case that wage labor “liberates the worker” or that consumers can choose freely between goods and services on the market; more importantly, money creates the conditions for cultivating the full potential of the individual. In short, “the price of freedom is the interdependence created by the money economy.”⁵¹

Relatedly, one of Simmel’s most insightful observations concerns the effect of the cash nexus on individual personality. He begins by emphasizing that the individual is not an isolated observer of the physical world but a *participant* in human society whose personality is formed through the affiliation and interaction of many social groups:

Just as the essence of the physical organism lies in the fact that it creates the unity of the life-process out of the multitude of material parts, so a man’s inner personal unity is based upon the interaction and connection of many elements and determinants.... Only the combination and fusion of several traits in one focal point forms a personality which then in its turn imparts to each individual trait a personal-subjective quality. It is not that it is this *or* that trait that makes a unique personality of man, but that he is this *and* that trait. The enigmatic unity of the soul cannot be grasped by the cognitive process directly, but only when it is broken down into a multitude of strands, the re-synthesis of which signifies the unique personality.

Such a personality is almost completely destroyed under the conditions of a money economy. The delivery man, the money-lender, the worker, upon whom we are dependent, do not operate as personalities because they enter into a relationship only by virtue of a single activity such as the delivery of goods, the lending of money ... The general tendency ... undoubtedly moves in the direction of making the individual more and more dependent upon the achievements of people, but less and less dependent upon the personalities that lie behind them.⁵²

This idea influenced early American sociologists and gave rise to a social theory of the nature of the mind and self. There are evident parallels, for example, between Simmel’s ideas and George Mead’s theory of the development of the self.⁵³

In the final chapter of *The Philosophy of Money*, titled “The Style of Life,” Simmel discusses themes he returns to in later writings. Here

we focus on just one issue he is concerned with: how competition transforms the core values of modern capitalism. Simmel understands competition as a form of conflict which may be a universal phenomenon that extends from the economic realm into every aspect of society. He observes that “the intensity of modern economic conflicts in which no mercy is shown is ... unleashed by direct interest in money itself ... where the deadly antagonistic competitor of today is the cartel ally of tomorrow.”⁵⁴ Simmel’s vision of the capitalist urban lifestyle, inherently riven by ferocious competition and conflict, parallels Marx’s memorable observation that “All that is solid melts into air,” which conjures up an image of perpetual change, conflict, and a capitalist lifestyle that is fluid, as the familiar evaporates. Simmel’s sociology is about the “ambivalence” we hold to the world and the ambivalent nature of our connections to it. It’s important to recognize that Simmel’s celebrated *The Philosophy of Money* was part of a bourgeois discourse on capitalist lifestyle – privileging those with the resources to readily access cultural forms to retain and express their individuality – suffused with ambiguity and contradiction, that shaped efforts by other classical social thinkers, to forge intellectual tools for understanding and explicating what was happening around them.⁵⁵

In *City and Modernity in Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin*, Vincenzo Mele argues that it is necessary to understand the urban process in the context of an analysis of capital accumulation. As such, the city is viewed as the “expressive platform of modernity, as its privileged social and cultural form.”⁵⁶ In his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (hereafter the “Metropolis”) Simmel elaborates on the main cultural ideas contained in *The Philosophy of Money*. The essay is explicitly a theory of the modern metropolis which illustrates his concept of “forms of association,”⁵⁷ but arguably, his entire work is pervaded by the “metropolitan spirit.”⁵⁸ For Simmel, the translation of everything into monetary exchanges, a natural feature of modernity, led to a gap between the “objective spirit” (material) and “subjective spirit” (personal).⁵⁹ The opening sentence of “Metropolis” neatly summarizes Simmel’s primary concern: “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and particularity of his or her existence against the superior powers of society, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life.”⁶⁰ In premodern society, people once struggled to feed their bodies and feudal relations

severely constrained personal liberties, but, Simmel avers, modern urbanites now strive to feed their minds, and attain personal liberties and fulfillment through cultural and technological means. In his final book, *The View of Life* (1918), Simmel further elaborates on the problems of urban living. It is a world, writes Elizabeth Goodstein, “devoid of enduring standards of truth or value, where nihilism ... fostered by the money economy were becoming apparent.”⁶¹

The urban environment put humans under siege. All that was unique, whole, and deep about human personality was flattened and made meaningless. Simmel observes:

From one angle, life is made infinitely easier in the sense that stimulations, interests, and the taking up of time and attention present themselves from all sides and carry it [life] in a stream, which scarcely requires any individual efforts for its ongoing. But from another angle, life is composed more and more of these impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values which seek to suppress particular personal interests and incomparabilities.⁶²

Each large city has tempo, a physical flow that sculpts every experience and encounter. For example, a walk along 7th Avenue in Calgary, Canada, is a totally different experience than a walk along the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, Scotland. For Simmel, the primary characteristic of urban life can be described as the “intensification of emotional life” and is in “deep contrast to the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence.”⁶³ How do people cope with the multitude of encounters and situations that threaten one’s sanity or security in the social milieu?

The urbanite, Simmel argues, has to learn to understand their surroundings in a calculative and rational way, approaching countless interactions, sometimes micro-episodes, with the head rather than the heart, that is, with “that part which is furthest from the depths of the personality.”⁶⁴ Thus the city type creates for itself “a protective organ” against the hostile external milieu. Over time the urbanite learns to navigate through the urban maelstrom by adopting a blasé attitude which acts as a filter through which modern city dwellers attempt to “maintain the independence and individuality of [their] existence against the sovereign powers of society,” argues Simmel.⁶⁵ The blasé attitude, “with its

overtone of concealed aversion,” establishes a kind of personal freedom and will be familiar to readers who has lived for some time in a city, but it is just one among many “coping strategies.”⁶⁶ Modern metropolises are not only spaces of complex labyrinths of relationships and social interaction, but with monetized exchanges *extending* modern lifestyles, the urban environment *intensifies* the modern experience of individual and social life.⁶⁷

Within Simmel’s discussion on investigating forms of social interactions, relationships, and dynamic processes, quantification is a kind of *leitmotif* throughout his writings. He emphasizes the ways in which urbanism requires a calculating mindset. Consider why we say “Two’s company, three’s a crowd.” What is the numerical threshold between inviting a “few” or a “crowd” to a party? And how does extending the number of friends into a social group affect interaction and relationships? In “Metropolis,” Simmel points out that “one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd.”⁶⁸ He addresses this urban phenomenon by “social arithmetic,” including discussing the effect of changing the number in a group. He writes: “[A] group of a certain extent and beyond a certain stage in its increase of numbers must develop for its maintenance certain *forms* ... it did not previously need; ... on the other hand, more restricted groups manifest qualities and reciprocal activities which, in the case of their numerical extension, inevitably disappear.”⁶⁹ The dyad (a one-on-one relationship), the triad (a relationship among three), and the heptad (with twenty-one relationships) are examples of forms in which group size affects the structure and the kind of relationships that are possible within it. Simmel’s “social arithmetic” of group dynamics contain a paradox. In general, the larger the group, the more heterogeneous its members may become; its members become more individualistic because they experience themselves as different from others they interact with, and the greater freedom and intellectual development there can be.

Simmel defines culture (*Kultur*) broadly “as the refinement, as the intellectualized forms of life, the accomplishment of mental and practical labor.”⁷⁰ He makes a series of observations, including that the objectification of culture affects people’s relationship to objects. The division of labor and the cash nexus exorcise from objects everything connected with spirituality and special, personal significance. In a passage that parallels some of Marx’s writings on product alienation, Simmel writes, “The process of



Photo 15.2. Simmel contends that the rational logic of money exchanges gives rise to individuals adopting a blasé attitude to life in order to filter out images that threaten a person's sense of self and security, such as the poor with whom they would prefer not to come into contact.

objectification of culture that, based on specialization, brings about a growing estrangement between the subject and its products ultimately invades even the more intimate aspects of our daily life.”⁷¹ The growing estrangement between people and objects is caused, Simmel argues, by the sheer quantity of objects coming onto the market, which makes it difficult for individuals to form a personal relationship with them. Frequent changes in fashion, Simmel also argues, discourage personal relationships with objects, even when people find, for instance, their old chair or shoes more comfortable than the newer, more fashionable ones. These tendencies thus lead to “the strangest eccentricities carried on simply in order to be different.”⁷²

The urban environment is the center of two human tragedies, which Simmel elaborates in his later work.⁷³ The most overwhelming is the *tragedy of modern culture* in which humans create an impersonal objectifying urban culture that overwhelms them. Culture grows increasingly beyond

the capacity of individuals to absorb and transcend it, forcing them to give up more and more of their uniqueness and spiritual freedom. Simmel's thoughts about objective or quantitative culture and agency might be interpreted as part of the process that Weber described as rationalization.⁷⁴ The other tragedy, discussed previously, is the *sociological tragedy* in which individuals become part of the mass and their distinctive individualities are crushed.⁷⁵ Unlike Marx, however, Simmel does not posit a vision of communism to overcome these tragedies; instead he echoes Weber's fatalism as to people's ability to avoid the metaphorical "Iron Cage" of repressive bureaucratic rationality. Cultural objectification, Simmel argues, is simply a fact of life, part of an urbanite's fate, and "it is not our task to complain or condone but only to understand."⁷⁶

CRITICISMS

Simmel was much criticized by Weber and Durkheim, who both felt that Simmel's oeuvre was inconsistent and scattered.⁷⁷ However, as Elizabeth Goodstein insightfully points out, Simmel considered his sociological writings to complement his philosophical writings and help to better understand the modern experience.⁷⁸ Simmel's concept of forms was a search for commonalities across borders of time and space, but this idea can also be criticized as running the risk of finding universal subjective commonalities that may not actually be there. Simmel's characterization of the "colorlessness" of money has been critiqued by Viviana Zelizer in *The Social Meaning of Money*, although this interpretation is not without criticism.⁷⁹

Critical social scholars have exposed Simmel's paradoxical thinking toward class, race, and gender relationships in society. Although Simmel remains deeply concerned with the alienating dynamics of modern capitalism that cause poverty, Thomas Kemple observes, "Simmel tends to push the discussion of class conflict and social inequality into the background."⁸⁰ Simmel's framing of the metropolis as the quintessential site for individual freedom with its embrace of ambiguity and paradox privileges White anxious European elites. In the early twentieth century, European and North American cities were characterized by high inequality, as they still are today. Cities when viewed through a class and race prism are fractured socially as well as spatially with low-income

dwellers in ghettos segregated, either by money or by legal means, from the wealthy occupying privileged urban zones. Mike Savage, a leading theorist on inequality, argues that cities are better characterized as the outcome of “historical processes of possession and dispossession,” with space clearly zoned according to the wealth of the inhabitants, which “mark inequality trenchantly on the urban landscape.”⁸¹

A further criticism is that a “Eurocentric” colorblind perspective can be identified collectively from his work. Before 1914, the German Empire encompassed four African colonies, and although no exact figures exist in the period prior to 1914, there were “clusters” of several thousand people of African descent present in the metropolises of Berlin and Hamburg.⁸² Simmel’s sociological microscope does not make visible Germany’s “invisible” Black diaspora and overlooks the dynamics of race and racial exclusion in cities. For this reason, Simmel offers only a partial interrogation of the conditions under which individuals relate to each other in an atomized society. Simmel championed the right of women to enter professions such as medicine, for example, which was an avant-garde concept at the time.⁸³ But, on other matters, he held conservative sensibilities about women. That objective culture, including art, culture, and social structures, was made by men, and is suited to the essential character of men.⁸⁴ According to Simmel, women exist in being; men exist in becoming.⁸⁵ Further, he contended that women view themselves through the lens of the male culture, seeing themselves as valued only as “means for the man, for the home, for the child.”⁸⁶ Simmel’s idea that women cannot participate in the creation of culture without denying their essence will find few feminist supporters in contemporary society.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In a society already atomized, the Italian sociologist Vincenzo Mele observes that Simmel dedicated only one essay to the “metropolitan spirit,” but arguably it was the phenomenon on which he reflected for almost his entire life, namely the relationship between the individual and society.⁸⁷ Simmel’s sociology pivots the focus away from concerns with macro-issues, toward the individual in an atomized society and seemingly superficial moments of micro-social interaction in the urban milieu. His ideas have been refracted into the evolving paradigms of

the Chicago school theory, interaction theory, conflict theory, and early postmodernism. The intellectual influence of Simmel on early American sociology has been frequently pointed out. Robert E. Park (1864–1944) and Ernest Burgess co-authored *The City* (1925), in which they studied the city from “a distinctly Simmelian perspective as ‘a state of mind.’”⁸⁸ It is sometimes overlooked, however, that Simmel himself drew on American sociology in an essay focusing on the nervousness of the city dweller, which suggests a “reciprocal transatlantic knowledge” transfer between Berlin and Chicago.⁸⁹ Like Park, W.E.B. Du Bois also studied in Berlin, and Simmel’s “The Stranger” influenced his concepts of “two-ness” and “double-consciousness.” In 1918 Simmel wrote, “I know that I shall die without intellectual heirs, and that is as it should be. My legacy will be, as it were, in cash, distributed to many heirs, each transforming his part into use conformed to *his* nature: a use which will reveal no longer its indebtedness to its heritage.”⁹⁰

In the twentieth century, Simmel’s sociology continued to have a palpable influence on American sociologists.⁹¹ His ideas were absorbed into the work of George Herbert Mead, and they influenced Peter Blau (1918–2000), particularly his theories relating to social structure, social exchange, and heterogeneity. Simmel’s concept of “The Stranger” also inspired Patricia Hill Collins’s theorizing on how Black female intellectuals make use of their marginality in academia to produce Black feminist thought on self, family, and society that reflects their lived experience.⁹² In the 1990s, some scholars described Simmel as a precursor of the “cultural turn” in social theorizing.⁹³ His works on European culture yield perceptive analyses of modernity, which is why they are deemed to be classics in the sociology of culture.⁹⁴ In the twenty-first century, when for the first time in human history more than half of the world’s population lives in cities, contemporary scholarship has drawn on Simmel to produce novel thinking on quantification and agency. For example, Simmelian sociology provides an intellectual launching point for considering the role of quantification in urban mental life – a phenomenon described as “scoreboard urbanism” – a conception of modern urban life that contrasts sharply with Simmel’s blasé urbanite.⁹⁵ True to Simmel’s argument, today’s digitized milieu provides interminable stimuli and expansiveness of interpersonal contacts and, arguably, is antithetical to nurturing a rich emotional life. And to end on the theme of unintended consequence, the digitized city is creating a digital divide,

a pervasive social and information inequality (see [chapter 12](#)). Digital technologies not only affect how urbanites interact with one another, but they also exert compounding negative influences on social inequities, such as education and mental health.⁹⁶ Finally, in an era of post-truth, when politicians lie, fabricate, and misrepresent the truth,⁹⁷ when generative artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT) can plagiarize artists and writers,⁹⁸ and when social media platforms are reconfiguring social interaction or “sociation,” Simmel’s insightful ideas offer inspiration for a modern articulation of contemporary discourses on culture, smart cities, and the sociology of the self.⁹⁹

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 Compare and contrast Simmel’s theories of capitalist modernity to the views of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber.
- 2 What is the sociological significance of Simmel’s social type, the stranger? How might his analysis of the stranger help our understanding of current debates on refugees?
- 3 In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel explores the equation between value and price. What role does interaction play in establishing the value of goods or services?

16

George Herbert Mead on Self and Society

George Herbert Mead provided a conceptual framework to the sociology of the self. His main intellectual legacy, posthumously published as *Mind, Self, and Society*, is to have developed “a pragmatist analysis of social interaction and individual self-reflection.”¹ Mead examines the phenomenon of the self from the standpoint of social behaviorism, a discipline that supposed only humans possess selves and have the mental capacity to reflect on their own existence, while maintaining that social factors and mechanisms shape the self. Hans Joas, a leading German sociologist, observes that Mead is recognized “beyond dispute” as a classical social theorist.² After Mead’s death, however, it was his theory of the “micro” self that became a prominent piece of conceptual architecture in the Chicago school of “symbolic interactionism.” While Mead’s articulation of the social self contains an explicit link to the way he conceptualizes society, it is surprising that few sociologists have “paid serious attention to his ideas of society.”³ Indeed, one sociologist confidently asserts, “Mead has relatively little to say about society.”⁴ In sharp contrast, Canadian sociologist Jean-François Côté compellingly argues that the complexity of the self-phenomenon is shaped by society: “The interest Mead had in the idea of society runs parallel to the interest that he had in the idea of the self.”⁵

This chapter, of necessity, is a highly selective interpretation of Mead’s theory of the social self and his concept of society. It begins with a review of his life and the intellectual context informing his thinking and work.

LIFE AND WORK

George Herbert Mead was born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, USA, on February 27, 1863. His childhood and youth were spent in the intellectual milieu of Oberlin College, Ohio, where his father went in 1869 to take up a professorship in homiletics. Mead's generation was exposed to Darwin's theory of evolution, and his student years at Oberlin witnessed the sciences gaining more space in American curricula, and thus coming into conflict with dogmatically religious claims to explain modernity.⁶ In response to Darwin's thinking, the young Mead asked the question: How could the moral values of socially committed American Protestantism be preserved without outdated theological dogma?

Mead graduated from Oberlin College in 1883, and, after moving between jobs, he entered Harvard University in 1887 to study philosophy. But Mead soon became disillusioned with philosophy and in 1888 switched to the study of psychology. From 1888 to 1891, Mead worked in Germany on a doctoral thesis (that remained unfinished), first in Leipzig with Wilhelm Wundt, and then in Berlin under Wilhelm Dilthey. At the time, Dilthey was working on his conception of "empathy," that is, the ability to understand an author by putting the interpreter in his or her position. It is speculated that this had an influence on Mead's view of being able to "take the role of the other" in the ontogenetic development of self-consciousness.⁷ As part of his doctoral research, Mead studied the psychology of children's early moral development and the perception and constitution of space.

In 1891, Mead moved back to America to take a position teaching psychology at the University of Michigan. In 1894, he moved to the newly established University of Chicago. The new university had two major goals: to combine research and teaching more closely, but also to ensure that both were strongly focused on practical tasks, preferably in the local community. Mead became part of an interdisciplinary network of Chicago academics who involved themselves in progressive social reform projects. Jane Addams was a close friend, and Mead supported her work at Hull-House. Prior to World War I (1914–18), Mead's academic work focused on developing an anthropological theory of communication and a related social psychology. After the war, he largely turned away from social reform projects to concentrate on various

questions related to the philosophy of science and of nature. At the University of Chicago, his “highly influential” course in social psychology provided the foundation of Mead’s intellectual enterprise. Mead died on April 26, 1931.

Evaluating Mead’s contribution to sociology has been controversial, not least because he never systematized his thoughts in book form during his lifetime. As an illustration of the problem, a text edited by Park and Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), did not include any work by Mead. As Côté observes, one can only speculate about Mead’s own reaction to this act of “exclusion” from such a foundational text, one with such importance for the early development of the discipline.⁸

Tracing the journey of Mead’s ideas and concepts in sociology was made difficult by the fact that his best known work, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), is a posthumous compilation of his lectures, through a stenographic copy of his 1927 social psychology course, two sets of student notes on the same course, and personal experience. With the publication of *Mind, Self, and Society* comes the problem of editorship. The order and interpretation of Mead’s thought by Charles W. Morris – a student of Mead – was challenged by Ellsworth Faris, presenting an early problem of interpretation that continually arises when examining Mead’s insights or appropriation of his social psychology, whether in sociology or philosophy.⁹ The ten articles Mead published between 1898 and 1930 in, among others, the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *Journal of Philosophy*, and the *International Journal of Ethics* provide further insight into his thoughts.¹⁰ Debate and controversy about Mead’s ideas and ambivalence on legacy illustrate that membership of the classical social canon is a social matter.

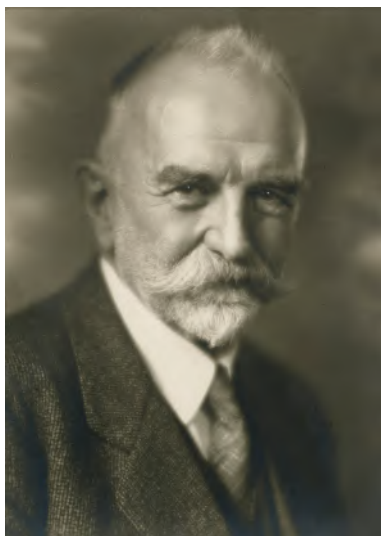


Photo 16.1. George Herbert Mead was born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in 1863. Evaluating Mead’s contribution to sociology has been controversial, not least because his best-known work is a posthumous compilation and publication of his lectures. He died in 1931.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCERS

Several major intellectual schools of American and German thought associated with social behaviorism, pragmatism, and dialectics shaped Mead's theory of the social self and society. At Harvard, he studied classical German idealism, a philosophy of human society that interpreted the "Kingdom of Heaven" as the historical realization of a community of all human beings in which there is universal communication among them.¹¹ Mead also experienced the intellectual milieu of German philosophy. The debate on the merits of *Geisteswissenschaften* (Human Sciences) or *Kulturwissenschaften* versus the *Naturwissenschaften* (Natural Sciences) led to "scientific" analysis of society with different epistemological, theoretical, and analytical devices. At the universities of Leipzig and Berlin, Wilhelm Wundt and Wilhelm Dilthey tutored Mead. It is Wundt's theory of gestures that must be credited for helping Mead to arrive at the idea of internalization of the external social experience.¹²

American psychologists John Dewey (1859–1952) and John B. Watson (1878–1958) are associated with *social behaviorism*, an approach to the study of the individual based almost exclusively on observable and measurable data on human behavior, which excludes ideas, emotions, and the consideration of inner mental experience and activity. In his 1896 article, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," Dewey proposes an integrative perspective of the relation between perception, sensibility, and human action, and shows their total integration into the whole.¹³ Social behaviorism is strongly associated with John Watson. In 1913, Watson's "Behaviorist Manifesto" put the emphasis on external behavior of people and their reactions to a given situation, rather than on the inner, mental state of people. Watson's social behaviorism rejected the study of human consciousness; he believed that, because it was not observable, it could not be scientifically studied. The works of Dewey and Watson influenced Mead's thinking. In theatrical language, absent of subtlety and nuance, Mead captures Watson's orientation by citing the Queen in Lewis Carroll's children's classic, *Alice in Wonderland* – "Off with their heads!"¹⁴ In direct contrast, Mead believes that consciousness can be studied from

a behaviorist perspective, providing the perspective is not narrowly conceived. He writes:

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 ... is the actual reaction itself. It is not necessary for psychology to get into metaphysical questions, but it is of importance that it should try to get hold of the response that is used in the psychological analysis itself.¹⁵

For Mead, consciousness is broadly conceived and becomes the location of a pattern of relations that are constituted within subjective experience in the course of interaction with the social world.¹⁶ Mead explicitly incorporates both Dewey's and Watson's reflections into his own, to study the social self.

The American philosophy of *pragmatism* influenced Mead's intellectual development. Its principal feature is that it rejects the idea of absolute truths in favor of regarding all ideas as provisional and subject to change by concrete experiences and empirical research. Pragmatism is a "down-to-earth" philosophy, concerned with plausible scientific explanations that make sense of practice and solving social problems in the real world. Charles Peirce (1839–1914) is credited with founding pragmatism. For Peirce, the triumph of the scientific method demonstrated practical relevance, precision, and plausibility of theoretical concepts. Peirce neatly summed up his perspective: "My point is that the meaning of a concept ... lies in the manner in which it could conceivably modify purposive action, and *in this alone*."¹⁷ William James (1842–1910) popularized Peirce's work. For James, pragmatism is distinguished above all by its focus on "the concrete ways of seeing."¹⁸ The root of Mead's intellectual formation can be traced through his relation to Wilhelm Dilthey. Arguing against the metaphysical foundations of earlier attempts at studying human societies, Dilthey writes:

For the analysis of human society *man himself* is given as a living unit, and the analysis of his psychophysical life-unit is therefore

our fundamental task.... The second task of the human sciences is to study both the *cultural systems* that intermesh with each other in society and the external organization of that society.¹⁹

Dilthey puts much emphasis on self-consciousness as the most important content for psychological studies. Mead only identified himself as a pragmatist late in his career, but in most of his work consciousness and social processes mutually inform one another in a dialectical way.²⁰

The ideas of Georg Simmel can be detected in Mead's work. As has been explicated in the previous chapter, for Simmel the individual is not an individual observer of the physical world but a "participant" in society whose personality is formed through the affiliation and interaction of others. Simmel writes: "Just as the essence of the physical organism lies in the fact that it creates the unity of the life-process out of the multitude of material parts, so man's inner personal unity is based upon the interaction or connection of many elements and determinants."²¹ This idea has evident parallels with Mead's theory of the social self, and William James's 1890 writings on "The Consciousness of Self" as well as Charles Horton Cooley's 1902 account of the "looking-glass self."²² Though Mead did review Simmel's book, the German scholar is not referenced in *Mind, Self, and Society*, and it's difficult to determine how much Mead borrowed from Simmel's ideas on individual personality.

As a doctoral student in Germany, Mead was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Hegel, especially his dialectics. (We examined dialectics in [chapter 4](#) on Marx's philosophy.) Dialectics as a feature of our thinking about the social world and dialectics as a feature of the social world itself are manifest in important ways in Mead's theory of the self and the development of society. There is contradiction between Mead's the "I," the "Me," and the "Self," and at the societal level between "individuals," "institutions," and "society" itself, which for Mead culminates in an understanding of society's development as a self-transforming entity. In terms of the development of the social self, one can interpret Mead's work in terms of a "dialectical" (Hegelian) process, as explained below. While not often recognized as such, Mead can be regarded as a dialectical thinker, and an understanding of dialectics certainly enhances the comprehension of Mead's work.²³

Pervasive in all Mead's work is his insistence on the "social" character of psychology. Yet, curiously, Mead avoids explicit reference to sociology

in *Mind, Self, and Society*. Mead appeared to consider that sociology did not meet the criterion to be “scientific.” Mead confidently wrote:

Social science in anthropology, in sociology, pure and impure, dynamic, and static, has not yet found its scientific method. It is not able to satisfactorily define its objects, nor to formulate their laws of change and development.²⁴

Unsurprisingly, therefore, debate surrounds Mead’s legacy in sociology. Mead was familiar with the writings of Georg Simmel, William James, and Charles Horton Cooley, although the work of Durkheim or Weber seems to have “escaped his attention.”²⁵

Among English-speaking sociologists, William James is credited with initiating the academic inquiry of self with the publication of his book, *The Principles of Psychology*, in 1890.²⁶ James describes the empirical self as composed of three elements: the “material me” that includes one’s body and material possessions, the “social me” that takes in one’s reputation and social standing, and the “spiritual me” that embraces one’s personality, beliefs, and values. James argues that the self is important because it guides a person’s behavior. He describes the social self of the individual as “his [*sic*] image in the eyes of his own ‘set’” or distinct groups of persons about whom they care.²⁷ However, as the American sociologist Shanyang Zhao explains, James did not explain *how* one comes to know one’s image in the eyes of others.²⁸ In the process of delineating the constituents of the empirical self, James deviates from the first-person point of view, using the pronouns “I” and “me” and switches to the third-person perspective, using the pronoun “they,” thereby producing conceptual inconsistencies. In 1902, Charles Horton Cooley published a monograph, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, in which he corrected this conceptual inconsistency by introducing the well-known metaphor of the “looking-glass self.” Cooley explains that one’s social self emerges from one’s “imagination” of one’s appearance to another person and one’s “imputation” of the other person’s judgment of that appearance. He calls the resulting self-image one attains the “looking-glass self.”²⁹

Mead appeared “reluctant” to fully endorse any sociological theory.³⁰ A more serious allegation is that Mead appropriated Cooley’s conception of the reflexive self “in order to bolster his [own] reputation.”³¹ The interpretation of Mead’s work in terms of the journey from his social

psychology to sociology should be at the center of our evaluation as to whether symbolic interactionism is Mead's enduring legacy.

To conclude our discussion of important intellectual influences into Mead's thinking, it is important that we acknowledge the influence of pragmatism on Mead's thoughts on social reform. We have already noted his involvement in the work of Jane Addams and Hull-House. For Mead, social psychology could be instrumental in social change. On the controversial topic of eugenics, Mead writes:

Eugenics education ... pass beyond the phase of description and look toward the formation of the social object. We recognize that we control the conditions that determine the individual. His errors and shortcomings can be conceivably corrected. His misery may be eliminated. His mental and moral defects corrected. His heredity, social and physical, may be perfected.³²

Mead's reference to eugenics, which is considered abhorrent today because of its use in Nazi Germany, was, in the early twentieth century, quite "en vogue" among social elites and some academics. The quoted passage, by contemporary experience, would also attract considerable criticism for its overt aim at social reengineering. That language and its role in the development of the self find expression in Mead's sociology of the self, to which we now turn.

MEAD'S THEORY OF SELF

In his work Mead details the social processes that create one's private self, emphasizing that it is conditioned by being deeply rooted in the culture. Underscoring the magnitude of cultural embeddedness, Shan-yang Zhao observes, "To understand human society, it is necessary to understand human selves, and to understand human selves it is necessary to understand human society."³³ In this project, Mead gives primacy to social experience. In contrast to the Anglo-American atomic ideology of individualism, Mead's premise is that we need other humans with whom to socially interact with to form one's self or identity. His parse starts from the behavior of the individual within a cooperating group: "the behavior of an individual can be understood only in terms

of the behavior of the whole social group.”³⁴ For Mead, adopting the behaviorist’s approach, the individual starts not from an atomized “Robinson Crusoe-like actor” who must first form social relationships and collective binding values, but from the complex activities or behaviors of three or more individuals; from what Mead called the “social act,” “We attempt ... to explain the conduct of the individual in terms of the organized conduct of the social group, rather than ... in terms of the conduct of the separate individuals belonging to it.”³⁵

Mead builds on Cooley’s clarification of the social self.³⁶ In *Mind, Self, and Society*, he argues that the possession of the reflexive mental capacity in itself does not produce the social self, but, as the metaphor of the “looking-glass self” illustrates, a person comes to possess the self by absorbing the attitudes of significant and generalized “others” toward the individual. For Mead, social groups, or “others,” lead to the development of self-conscious mental states. The body is not a self; it “is essentially a social structure and it arises in social experience.”³⁷ Dialectically the self is related to the human mind. He argues that, on the one hand, the self emerges only when the mind has developed. On the other hand, the self is vital to the development of the mind. For Mead, the human mind is defined not as a thing but as a process, as an inner conversation with one’s self. He posits, “It is absurd to look at the mind simply from the standpoint of the individual human organism; ... it is *essentially a social phenomenon* ... We must regard mind ... as arising and developing within the social process, within the empirical *matrix of social interactions*.”³⁸ Mind and self are therefore conjoined because the self is both a mental process and a social process: “It is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience,” writes Mead.³⁹

Drawing on Wundt’s concept of the gesture, Mead considered the gesture the basic mechanism in the social act and in the social process more generally.⁴⁰ Mead analyzed an expressive gesture in social terms and, from such gestures, traces the development of language communication. Mead also regarded as crucial the internalization of such gestures: “Only in terms of gestures as significant symbols is the existence of the mind or intelligence possible; for only in terms of gestures which are significant symbols can thinking – which is simply an internalized or implicit conversation of the individual with himself by means of such gestures – take place.”⁴¹

It is the development of vocal gestures, especially in the form of language, that require concomitant thought on the part of the actor before

a response, a process which distinguishes humans from animals. Mead writes, “Vocal gestures ... [have] been responsible, ultimately, for the origin and growth of present human society.”⁴² Mead’s understanding of language also incorporates the crucial condition of “reflexiveness” within the social process, for the development of the human mind. Mead writes:

The evolutionary appearance of mind or intelligence takes place when the whole social process of experience and behavior is brought within the experience of any one of the separate individuals implicated therein, and when the individual’s adjustment to the process is modified and refined by the awareness or consciousness which he thus has of it. *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 of that process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it. *Reflexiveness ... is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of the mind.*⁴³

This sociocultural analysis of the development of the mind provides the key concepts of Mead’s social psychology. Mead’s intellectual enterprise is to demonstrate that “mind and the self” are uncontested “social emergent,” and that the language process provides the basic mechanism for their emergence.

For Mead, therefore, the self is not initially formed at birth, but arises in the dialectical process of social experience and activity. The self develops in the given individual as a result of her or his relations to that complex process as a whole and to other individuals within that process. The self internalizes as a result of lived experiences and social intercourse, which also translates as inner conversation or reflexivity and social attitude of the other assumed within the self. Thus, the individual takes the form of self-consciousness “only to the extent that he or she internalizes a set of social relations in which he or she is situated (as an object) with respect to other selves.”⁴⁴ Otherwise, this individual remains “unconscious” of herself or himself – in other words, is deprived of self-consciousness.



Photo 16.2. The self is a social structure, represented in the developmental activities of two forms of behaviors: “play” and the “game.” At the play stage, a “mother” feeding her “baby,” a child becomes a “Me” through interaction with a particular other, its mother, as distinct from the child’s agency as an “I” with its own sense of freedom and initiative.

The genesis of Mead’s theory of the social self is represented in the developmental activities of two forms of children’s behaviors: “play” and the “game.” At the “play” stage, children play out all the roles of an invisible, imagined interaction among companions, in which the child uses gesture and response. For example, a child plays at being a mother, at being a teacher, at being a firefighter; that is, it is taking different roles. Thus, the other’s behavior is directly represented and complemented by the child’s behavior. The child takes this set of gestures and responses and “organizes them into a certain whole.”⁴⁵ In contrast, at the “game” stage, the child must be guided by the conduct of all other participants; anticipation of an imaginary companion’s gesture and response is no longer sufficient. As Mead states: “The child who plays in a game must be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in the game, and ... these different roles must have a definite relationship to each other.”⁴⁶ Thus, in an organized social group the child must orient herself

or himself by a goal that is valid for all the other group members, which yields a “unity of self” or what Mead calls the “generalized other.”

The generalized other, which is one of Mead’s best-known concepts, is the attitude of the whole community or, in the example of a hockey game, the attitude of the entire team. The ability to take the role of the generalized other is essential to fully develop a self. Mead continues, “Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized ... does he develop a complete self.”⁴⁷ The behavioral expectations of this generalized other are, for instance, the rules of the game, or more generally, the norms, values, and mores of a social group.⁴⁸

Similar to Freud’s internally divided model of psychic life (the Ego, Id, and Superego), none of the concepts that Mead uses (the “I,” the “Me,” and the “Self”) can be located in the human organism. They are the symbolic expressions of the different phases of the relations between the nervous system and the environment.⁴⁹ The “I” refers to the principle of creativity and spontaneity. The “Me” refers to the individual’s perception of how others see her or himself at a more primal level, to the individual’s internalization of what the other “expects me to do or be.”⁵⁰ The “Me” forms within the individual from a reference other and is a basic element of an individual’s developing self-image. While it may appear that creativity is stymied as individuals are busy conforming to the generalized other, Mead explains that there is not simply one grand generalized other but multiple generalized others in society. When an individual encounters several significant generalized others, these become references for an individual who must internalize and synthesize to form a new self. As Joas observes: “If this synthesization is successful, the ‘self’ comes into being that is a unitary self-evaluation and action-orientation which allows interaction with more and more communicative partners; and at the same time, a stable personality structure develops which is certain of its needs.”⁵¹ Mead’s conceptualization of the three elements of the self is represented in [figure 16.1](#).

As mentioned above, Mead insisted that the self “arises in social experience ... it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience.”⁵² Mead defines the “I” and the “Me” in the following way:

The “I” is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the “me” is the organized set of attitudes of others, which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized “me,” and then one reacts toward that as an “I.” ... And it is

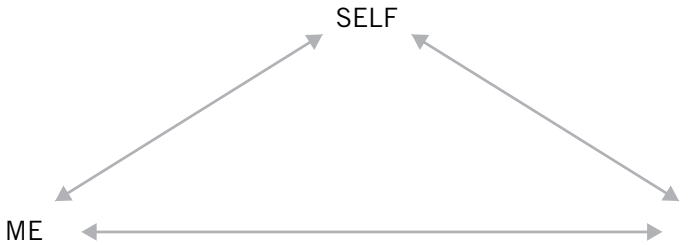


Figure 16.1. Elements of the self

due to the individual's ability to take the attitudes of these others in so far as they can be organized that he gets self-consciousness. The taking of all of those organized sets of attitudes gives him his "me": that is the self he is aware of.... That is, the self that immediately exists for him in his consciousness. He has their attitudes, knows what they want and what the consequences of any act of his will be, and he has assumed responsibility for the situation. Now, it is the presence of those organized sets of attitudes that constitute that "me" to which he as an "I" is responding.⁵³

The "I" represents the immediate and creative response while the "Me" represents self-conscious control and reflexivity. For Mead, consciousness is not located in the brain, but rather it is accounted for within the social process. It is only when the "Me" is taken as an object by the "I," a process made available through its relation to "generalized others," that the social self is said to embody the formation (and transformation) of self-consciousness. People are constantly reaching to organized social communities as a way not of asserting themselves, but of expressing themselves. The attitudes involved are gathered from the group, but the individual in whom they are organized has the opportunity of giving them a new expression. Mead writes:

One appeals from fixed conventions which no longer have any meaning to a community in which the rights shall be publicly recognized, and one appeals to others on the assumption that there is a group of organized others that answer to one's own appeal – even if the appeal be made to posterity. In that case there is the attitude of the "I" as over against the "me."⁵⁴

The realization of the self in the social situation in which it arises is a dialectical process. Mead posits that the individual, in relationship to others in the community, is “constantly reacting” to the social attitudes and changing in a cooperative process the very community to which s/he belongs. There are therefore conflicts or contradictions such as between the “I” and the “Me,” the need to conform to the generalized other, and the drive also to be creative and change society, which appear to proximate to Hegel’s philosophy and dialectics. Importantly, it is language that allows for this continuous reaction and response from the self. Here, Mead emphasizes the symbolic nature of the social process: “The process of communication is ... in one sense more universal ... It is the medium through which ... cooperative activities can be carried on in the self-conscious society.”⁵⁵ The key question, therefore, and one largely unexplored by Mead scholars, is: What is the process of self-consciousness, not only for the individual, but for society?

MEAD’S THEORY OF SOCIETY

According to Mead, to understand the self, it is necessary to understand human society.⁵⁶ His concept of the self therefore involves forming one’s own identity through social interactions with other humans. It is only when the “Me” is taken as an object by the “I,” a dialectic process made possible through its relation to “others,” that the social self is said to embody the formulation and transformation of self-consciousness. In Mead’s conceptual framework, it is only when an “Institution” (or generalized social attitudes) is taken as an object by the “Individuals” in their relation to “Society” that it is said to embody a self-conscious society.⁵⁷ [Figure 16.2](#) is a diagrammatic representation of Mead’s conception of society, consisting of three elements: Institutions, Individuals, and Society.

The “Institutions” of society are “organized forms of group or social activity – forms so organized that the individual members of society can act adequately and socially by taking the attitudes of others towards these activities.”⁵⁸ For Mead, social institutions, like individual selves, are developments within, and formalized manifestations of, the social life-process.⁵⁹ “Individuals” appear as mediations between their respective own “selves” and their existence as “citizens” or “individual members” within a society.

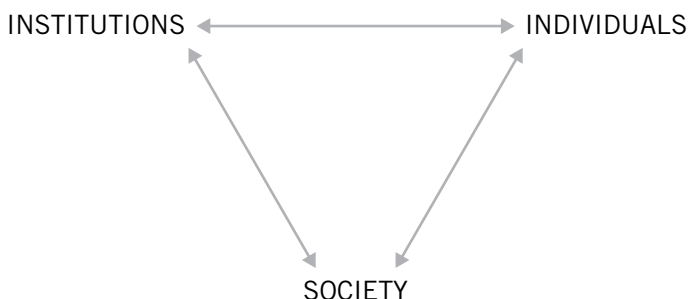


Figure 16.2. Structure of society

“Society” itself represents all its individual members within a universal unity, at a particular evolutionary stage of development. Mead explicitly argues that the evolution of society is decisive for both the self-conscious development of society and the self-conscious development of social selves. The evolutionary process in Mead’s concept of society can be construed as a passage from “past” to “present” and to “future” in the dynamics of society. In Mead’s social psychology, “institutions” and social “habits,” together with what he calls the “generalized other,” represent social elements involved in the dialectic development of society and of the self. Mead expresses it like this:

There are, then, whole series of such common responses in the community in which we live, and such responses are what we term “institutions.” The institution represents a common response on the part of all members of the community to a particular situation. This common response is one which, of course, varies with the character of the individual.... There is a common response in varied forms. And these variations ... have an organization, which gives unity to the variety of the responses.... When we arouse such attitudes, we are taking the attitude of what I have termed a “generalized other.” Such organized sets of response are related to each other; if one calls out one such set of response, he is implicitly calling out others as well.⁶⁰

Institutions, habits, and the generalized other all belong to the group or “phylogenetic” development of society; thus, they have to

be understood as being produced by the “self-evolution and self-transformation” of society.⁶¹ Societal shifts, trade unions, and the suffragist movement in the twentieth century and identity politics and the #MeToo movement of the twenty-first century are examples of how the self-transformation of society occurs within mass democracy.⁶²

In these forms, they are presented as “organized” and defining the social, or “socially responsible, patterns of individual conduct in only a very broad and general sense, affording plenty of scope for originality, flexibility, and variety of such conduct.”⁶³ Similar reactions and responses among individuals are yielded through institutions, habits, and the generalized other of human behavior; the meanings that are attached to practices (e.g., traffic signals dictate driver behavior because of the meaning associated with “stop” signs); and forms of public discourse (e.g., human rights). For Mead, the self is formed by its participation in the social process of which it is part; importantly, if self-consciousness is dialectically developed in individuals as a microsocial process, it will be the result of the general macrosocial process that takes place in the development of society. Unlike Marx, Mead did not precisely explain the developmental “stages,” so to speak, of human history that take societies from one form to the next; he only observed that so far as the development of human society is concerned, “the process itself is a long way from its goal.”⁶⁴ However, he does make reference to some features of human society that demonstrate crucial differences in its development:

One difference between primitive human society and civilized human society is that in primitive human society the individual self is much more completely determined, with regard to his thinking and his behavior, ... than he is in civilized human society. In other words, primitive human society offers much less scope for individuality – for original, unique, or creative thinking and behavior on the part of the individual self within it or belonging to it – than does civilized human society; and indeed the evolution of civilized human society from primitive human society has largely depended on or resulted from a progressive social liberation of the individual self and his conduct, with the modifications and elaborations of the human social process which have followed from and been made possible by that liberation.⁶⁵

Thus, in modern urbanism or “civilized” societies the “I” predominates and there is greater creative individuality in contrast to “primitive” societies where the controlled “Me” prevailed over the creative “I.” As others have observed, however, Mead’s evolution of the self is predicated on a dubious assumption when so much social theory – from, for example, Michel Foucault to Anthony Giddens – envisages the reverse process where the creative “I” is subordinated to the discipline and self-restraint of the “Me.”⁶⁶ Mead argues that the two processes – the self-conscious development of society and the self-conscious development of social selves – are parallel in that they participate in an understanding of ourselves that can only be attained as collective effort, formally transcribed and interpreted by historians.

Interestingly – and parallels can be drawn here with Marx’s theory of history and Weber’s ideas on charismatic domination – Mead points out that the historical process, in order to take place under specific circumstances, relies on particular individuals who emerge as “leaders” with rhetorical skills and appear to have developed a higher level of consciousness of themselves and of their own society. As Mead states:

Occasionally a person arises who is able to take in more than others of an act in process, who can put himself into relation with whole groups in the community whose attitudes have not entered into the lives of the others in the community. He becomes a leader.... Figures of that sort become of enormous importance because they make possible communication between groups otherwise completely separated from each other. The sort of capacity we speak of is in politics the attitude of the statesman who is able to enter into the attitudes of the group and to mediate between them by making his own experience universal, so that others can enter into this form of communication through him.⁶⁷

In this passage, Mead appears to be echoing Weber’s work on “pure” charisma, and the important capacity of leaders to channel pathos to make the leaders’ “own experience universal.”

The multidimensional reality of the social self (an “I” and a “Me”) and society (“Individuals” and “Institutions”) each represent “mediation” between these forms. The topology of the concept of the self (figure 16.1) and the concept of society (figure 16.2) can be integrated

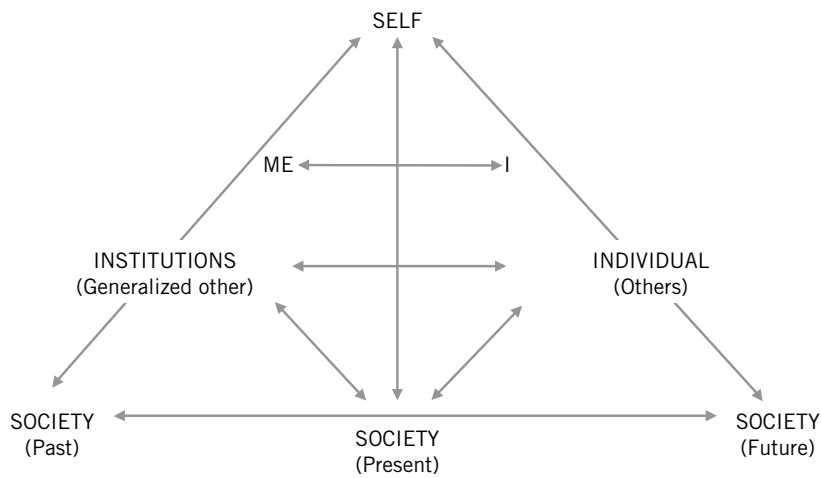


Figure 16.3. The microprocess and macroprocess of self and society

to show two sets of triangles representing how the self and society are “integral parts of each other, interdependent realities that continuously interpenetrate each other,”⁶⁸ as shown in [figure 16.3](#).

The upper triangle depicts the microprocess of self, particularly through the “Me,” which, as explained, represents the internalization of organized relations to others, as well as the generalized other. The lower triangle represents the macroprocess of society, particularly through “others,” representing “individuals” in their external forms, and “institutions” as the objective form of the generalized other.

This topology of Mead’s concept of self and society depicts individuals as members of society, and society embodied in individuals, as reflected in the two integrated triangles. For Mead, the “social self” is understood according to self-consciousness, which implies a reciprocal relation to other social selves. However, social selves also exist in relation to institutions and society as a whole. As he puts it:

We must recognize that the most concrete and most fully realized society is ... that which is found in the interplay of social habits and customs, in the readjustments of personal interests that have come into conflict, and which take place outside of court, in the change of social attitude that is not dependent upon an act of legislature. In the society which is closest to that of the primitive man we find

the reality of all that is prefigured and set out in the institutions, and while problems that are not and cannot be solved through the readjustments of the individual's habit and the immediate change in social attitudes have to be dealt with in the halls of legislature and the rooms of our high courts, they are only brought there to enable men to envisage them more clearly and especially to become conscious of interests which could not appear immediately in their reactions to each other. When, however, this has taken place and the essential meaning of the problem has been grasped, its solution lies in the action of common citizens with reference to the common goods which our institutions have brought to their view and so ... they can react to these new interests as they have to those to which they are already adjusted.⁶⁹

This reconstruction of Mead's concept of self and society considers his understanding of society's evolution: "past societies" (which go back to animal societies in Mead's thought) and, conversely, "future society," which deals primarily with the "Me."

Selves and societies are understood in their mutual relations, which develop in a dynamic, evolutionary way: From past societies to future society. In other words, there is dialectic at work between Self and Society, one that is mediated by "mind," as it develops over time, from past societies to future society. Mead's conception of society is dynamic, as seen when he states:

The social conflicts among the individual members of a given organized human society, which, for their removal, necessitate conscious or intelligent reconstruction and modifications of that society by those individuals of their own selves and personalities. Thus the relations between social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are reciprocal and internal or organic; social reconstruction by the individual members of any organized human society entails self or personality reconstruction in some degree or other by each of these individuals, and vice versa, for, since their selves or personalities are constituted by their organized social relations to one another, they cannot reconstruct those selves or personalities without also reconstructing, to some extent, the given social order, which is, of course, likewise constituted by their organized social

relations to one another ... [I]n short, social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are the two sides of a single process – the process of human social evolution.⁷⁰

For Mead, it is the development of society per se, however, that has the power to open up the minds of individual selves and inspire an understanding of social reform. Mead states:

Human society ... does not merely stamp the pattern of its organized social behavior upon any one of its individual members, so that this pattern becomes likewise the pattern of the individual's self; it also, at the same time, gives him a mind, as the means or ability of consciously conversing with himself in terms of the social attitudes which constitute the structure of his self and which embody the pattern of human society's organized behavior as reflected in that structure. And his mind enables him in turn to stamp the pattern of his further developing self ... upon the structure or organization of human society, and thus in a degree to reconstruct and modify in terms of his self the general pattern of social or group behavior in terms of which his self was originally constituted.⁷¹

This reciprocal relation between self-consciousness in individuals and self-conscious society, also incorporating “time” through the categories of “past” and “future,” represent “the complete topological view of Mead's concept of society.”⁷²

Writing at a time of social unrest, particularly in Western Europe prior to World War I (1914–18) and post-1917 revolutionary Russia, Mead discusses the processes by which societies transform. For Mead, the future society is different, and involves universal social processes with free, open communications as its core foundation. As he puts it:

The human social ideal – the ideal or ultimate goal of human social progress – is the attainment of a universal society in which all human individuals would possess a perfected social intelligence, such that all social meanings would each be similarly reflected in their respective individual consciousness – such that the meanings of any one individual's acts or gestures (as realized by him and expressed in the structure of his self, through his ability to take the

social attitude of other individuals toward himself and toward their common social ends or purposes) would be the same for any other individual whatever who responded to them.⁷³

Like Marx, Mead does envisage an “ideal society,” but his ideal state has to be understood in the context of the political context in Western Europe and Mead’s views on the primacy of education. Importantly, for Mead education “provides the crucial link between the ontogenetic process in the present in the child and the phylogenetic process of the evolution of society ... it is by reforming education that society at large can eventually be reformed.”⁷⁴

Mead’s theory of the human self necessarily involves a relation to human society. His explanation of the dialectic process at work in the development of self-consciousness, both for the individual and for society, is a significant contribution to sociological theory, even though he seems reluctant to endorse the discipline in his writings.

CRITICISM

At a theoretical level there are several aspects of Mead’s theory of self that have drawn criticism. The first criticism relates to the ambivalence of Mead’s definition of the “Self,” which has been long debated with respect to what the “I” and “Me” elements mean. At times Mead considers the “I” as part of the social experience, but at other times he apparently considers it as an ever-elusive “transcendental entity” that stands “behind” the “Me” but reacts to it (and to reference others), and at still other times he considers the “I” as the phase of the self representing the mind in a biological sense (driven by “impulses”). As a result, Mead appears to shift from the sense of an “I” that is part of the social intercourse to the contradictory sense of an “I” defined prior to this social experience.⁷⁵

The second criticism relates to the neglect and need to elucidate the concept of the “Me” in a society with a racial divide – how the other (African American) sees the White American – or to the internalization of what the other expects “Me” to do or be. Mead discusses obstacles to the development of the “ideal society,” though, and draws attention to caste systems, which, because they are restrictive, “cut down

the possibility of the full development of the self.”⁷⁶ Mead nonetheless appears oblivious to the obstacles in apartheid America (let alone to the work of Du Bois), even though he acknowledges that the development of the democratic society “implies the removal of castes as essential to the personality of the individual.”⁷⁷ Such an observation acknowledges that widespread race discrimination denied the development of the personality of African Americans.

A third criticism relates to Mead’s understanding of politics and, in particular, the influences of privileged corporate elites on shaping public discourses. It is a striking omission that these powerful actors, which by the 1900s were determining life experiences for millions of workers and influencing politicians, were so little mentioned, let alone studied, by a pragmatist thinker such as Mead.⁷⁸ Relatedly, Mead’s sociocultural analysis of the self and society neglects the whole issues of “power” as it is objectively structured in society, which is puzzling, to say the least, given the importance he attached to the role of selves in the transformation of society through the remodeling of institutions, fueled by the activism of charismatics and by the activity of social movements.

In his conceptual framework of the social self, Shanyang Zhao acknowledges, albeit in an oblique manner, the importance of social power in shaping the self. The embeddedness of the individual is a necessary prerequisite for the acquisition of the self, but to account for the variations in the selves possessed by individuals within and across societies it is necessary to include individuals’ positions in the class structure. Social categories such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity carry tangible power that enable individuals to have access to different kinds and amounts of resources (e.g., law, education, housing, employment) and hence different possibilities for self-action. In Zhao’s words, “individuals have different access to resources depending on the social positions they occupy in formal organizations, the social capital they cultivate in informal social networks, and the social categorizations they fall under and identify themselves with.”⁷⁹ Thus, echoing Weber’s perspective on class, even when humans live in the same culture, a person’s ability to enact their self will differ radically as it is conditioned by person’s embedment in society’s social structure and access to resources.

The fourth criticism relates to the intersection of language, gender, and class. The Irish writer, Manchán Magan, waxes lyrical about the importance of language. A language communicates not only to others

but to the psyche and the subconscious. A language describes things but also summons them into being. And, importantly, a language is deeply embedded in the local milieu and connects us to our surroundings.⁸⁰ For Mead, too, language defines the human mind as it defines human society, which means that language is central to social interaction and the development of the self. This being said, it seems that Mead did not pay much attention to the way communication differs between genders. There appear to be important differences between conversation styles of men and women, which affect social relationships.⁸¹ Gender, however, is not analyzed by Mead. To do so, particularly in an American society deeply segregated by race and shaped by a history in which White upper-class men were at the top of the social hierarchy, would have better captured the nuances of self and societal self-development. Furthermore, there is a paucity of thinking in Mead's conceptualization of society for the intersection of language and class. It is well documented that children growing up in low-income, working-class families experience a far less rich vocabulary during their early years than do children in professional families,⁸² and, generally, social class has major effects on children's cognitive and language development.⁸³ Although Mead does discuss social classes in terms of "enriching" social relations, a consideration of the explicit link between class, social inequality, and language would have better enhanced our understanding of the development of the self.

The fifth criticism relates to Mead's concepts of "universality" and the notion of the "ideal society." Postcolonial theory has influenced the way we understand the role of language, and the way we understand the process of colonization. Since the fifth century with the first missionaries, European languages have been used as a spell to captivate people, to suppress Indigenous languages, and as a tool to control.⁸⁴ Postcolonial theory has critiqued Mead's "ultimate goal of human progress ... a universal human society." Cultural transmission is implicit in Mead's theory and vision of an "ideal society" when it is embedded in the formation and transformation of habits. In the context of recent military intervention by Western powers in other countries, such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, often with an explicit goal of "regime change" or "building democracy," Mead's universal project, although legitimate in the eyes of some Western politicians, raises justifiable questions about the legitimacy of Western "democracies" imposing their system and institutions on other societies.⁸⁵

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In his critical review of Mead's work, Hans Joas points out that during his lifetime Mead's influence was largely limited to a few colleagues and students at the University of Chicago.⁸⁶ After his death, the school of "symbolic interactionism" appropriated Mead's social psychology. To this end, the American sociologist Herbert Blumer, a former student of Mead, was instrumental in refashioning Mead's social psychology to sociology. Thus, Mead came to be seen as the school's "progenitor," even though, until the 1980s, his ideas remained somewhat "marginal," referenced as important only for the understanding of the internalization of cultural norms and mores. Outside the United States, some European scholars (e.g., Lev Vygotsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jürgen Habermas) were openly receptive to Mead's work. For example, Habermas identified Mead as the principal inspirer of his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981).⁸⁷

Since the 1980s, sociologists have attached greater importance to Mead's ideas. Zhao observes that sociologists have conceptualized "self" in different ways. For example, in *Modernity and Self-Identity*, British sociologist Anthony Giddens defines "the self as reflectively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography."⁸⁸ But, as Zhao points out, self and self-identity are not the same thing; "self is the *entity* one perceives to be oneself, whereas self-identity is 'a *concept* of a person.'"⁸⁹ To paraphrase the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, self is not an ontology of being, but of becoming. And Giddens's point was that in late modernity the self-identity of the person was transformed through the influence of mass media and other electronic technologies. Again from Zhao, "The self is a part of the self-phenomenon"⁹⁰ and, importantly, society fashions the self. Therefore, in contrast to the Anglo-American atomic ideology of individualism, humans need other humans with whom to socially interact with to form oneself.

Notably, a "reconstruction" and reinterpretation of Mead's work has focused on the societal or macro-sociological and reformist components of his ideas, which, it is argued, were erased, together with his radical ideas on social reform, by Herbert Blumer.⁹¹ That Blumer's interpretation of Mead has become dominant within North American sociology, Jean-François Côté argues, can still be seen in contemporary social theory that rarely employs his social psychology beyond a "cursory

understanding” of the “self” in its interactions with “others.” Moreover, the dominant interpretations of Mead do not consider his concept of society.⁹²

The conceptualization of self has important implications for modern social theorizing. At the beginning of this book, we posed an enduring question for social theory: “What are the sources of order and social change?” The order/change conundrum can be formulated as “How can the agency of the individual be theoretically reconciled with the regulative/orderly power of social structure?” The concept of the self can cast new light on this enduring question. Again, Zhao notes, “the normative selves enable the construction of institutional rules and regulations that hold competing individuals together for cooperative activity beyond the realm of physical copresence.”⁹³ As Côté rightly points out, a reinterpretation of Mead’s dialectic views of the self extends beyond the realm of “symbolic interactionism” to theorizing about societal order and change. In sum, that Mead’s theory of self and society continues to inspire sociological theorizing defines his place in the classical social canon.

FURTHER THINKING

- 1 How does Mead’s theory of the self explicitly link to his concept of society?
- 2 Mead’s social theory focuses on the social self, language, thinking, and meaning, and how they are interrelated to social interaction. Thinking of contemporary cities, what other factors might be involved in shaping and sustaining social interaction?
- 3 How does Mead’s conceptualization of institutions compare with Weber’s imagery of an “iron cage” or the contemporary metaphor of the “digital cage”?

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PART 3

Classical Social Theory Today

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17

The Classical Canon in an Age of Inequality

The classical social thinkers discussed at length in this book have shaped our understanding of capitalist modernity. The works of Marx, Wollstonecraft, and Martineau arguably belong to the prehistory of sociology as a discipline; but they and the other authors have been adopted as part of the classical canon. In general, their oeuvre tried to comprehend the technological, economic, and cultural changes that occurred in Western capitalist societies. The legacy of the canonical writers may be summarized around six core concepts – *materiality*, *morality*, *rationality*, *culture*, *gender*, and *race* – that can be used to examine modern society. As we have tried to explain, it must be acknowledged that there are irreconcilable differences of theoretical thinking between the authors we have selected for discussion.

In recent decades, extreme inequality is a lived experience for an overwhelming number of working families in the Global North. In his book, *It's OK to Be Angry about Capitalism*, US senator Bernie Sanders directs his ire at an elite few, the top 1 percent, and America's "uber-capitalist system."¹ That workers across North America and Europe are experiencing a lower standard of living than their parents is clear enough from Gini coefficients. The Gini coefficient, initially devised by the fascist Italian economist and sociologist Corrado Gini in 1912, is the most significant composite metric of inequality.² Its values range from zero to one. A Gini coefficient of zero indicates a hypothetical case of full equality, where national income is shared equally by all

members of the country. Alternatively, a Gini coefficient of one indicates a hypothetical case of extreme inequality, in which a single individual or household receives all the national income. In practice, Gini coefficients for income distribution range between 0.2 and 0.7, with most falling in the range of 0.3 to 0.5. A word of caution: owing to limitations such as reliable GDP and income data, the Gini coefficient may overstate income inequality and be inaccurate.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, driven by the rise of economic growth in Asia, particularly China, *global* inequality began to fall from 0.7 Gini points to 0.6 Gini points.³ But as overall global inequality has fallen, income inequality has risen in the Global North, even in less laissez-faire states of the European Union. The Gini coefficient for the United States, for example, was 0.43 in 1990, but rose to 0.49 by 2021, which indicates an increase in income inequality over the past 30 years.⁴ The slide in the global income position of working-class families in the West creates a new source of social polarization that gives rise to claims that workers have been “left behind” because of globalization;⁵ explains why protesters took to the streets in the United States, Britain, France, and elsewhere; and supports arguments that we live in an age of extreme inequality. Globalization has gone hand in hand with the accentuation of inequality.

In this closing chapter, we argue that in this age of extreme inequality, the intellectual concepts associated with the classical era exert a profound influence on public discourses about coming to terms with what is happening around us, and agency in the context of global capitalism. Indeed, the classics remain insightful and relevant, and they will continue to inspire critical social theory and research. All the classical thinkers we have discussed contributed to the analysis of inequality (amongst many other aspects of modernity) either in terms of class, place in the division of labor, the system of power and authority, gender, or race. As Mike Savage, a leading sociologist of inequality, argues, “the challenge of inequality is bound up with the accumulation of capital, wealth, and resources, which is seeing the reassertion of older historical forms.”⁶ Inequality matters!

A historical perspective attuned to the works of the classical canon helps to place inequality in the Global North as part of a wider socio-economic and political context changing over the last four decades, and not to treat it as entirely *sui generis*. Take, for example, the modernist

framing of the city as the quintessential space of capitalist energy and dynamism. Cities today are better characterized as “the sedimentation of consolidated capital,” the outcome of “historical processes of possession and dispossession,” with space clearly zoned according to the wealth of the inhabitants, which “mark inequality trenchantly on the urban landscape.”⁷ Take also the contemporary discourse on the climate crisis. The threshold of containing global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels makes the climate crisis concrete in political terms and is a powerful exemplar of a new way of thinking among global leaders, but the power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South and the connection with inequality is left suspended. Although meeting the global target is an existential necessity, emission targets alone avoid uncomfortable discussions about racial inequality. As Mikaela Loach argues, the climate crisis came from the same colonial and capitalist systems of exploitation and subjugation that cause other forms of inequality.⁸

The effects of inequality, felt so differently by population groups between and within countries, was highlighted during the 2020–2 COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic underscore how inequality is not simply defined by one linear hierarchical scale – for example, income distribution – but can be evident in multiple dimensions.⁹ While skewed income distribution makes inequality concrete, brilliantly analyzed by the French economist Thomas Piketty, in *Capital in the 21st Century* (2014), it also neglects and ultimately limits our understanding of other axes of inequality, for example, class, gender, and race. Intersectionality is a critical analytical tool for researching into inequality. Class, gender, race, and other categories are theorized as mutually constructing phenomena that influence social inequality simultaneously rather than independently.¹⁰ The COVID-19 crisis directly put into question whose interests come first, and whose come last? Who has the power to protect their positions, their privilege, their wealth at all costs? Who is powerless and left to their fate? As William Davies and his colleagues argue, the COVID-19 crisis offers an opportunity to investigate key features of modern capitalism and the implicit hierarchies of value that are attached to different people and institutions, but which are otherwise invisible or repressed.¹¹ The main focus in this chapter is to shine a spotlight on the intersection between the pandemic and inequalities in the contexts of Canada, the United States, and Britain.

THE CLASSICAL SOCIAL THINKERS

In [part 2](#) of *Capitalism and Classical Social Theory*, we began our journey into the canon with Karl Marx's contribution to social theory. At the center of Marx's own epistemology is the primacy of capitalist production and the way this shapes the political and social life of society. We suggested that Marx's ideas on ideology are highly relevant in modern political economy and sociology to analyze the nexus between the realm of ideas and those of neoliberalism and economic nationalism pursued by the political far right. Durkheim's discussion of the "forced division of labor" took him into the territory of class inequalities more usually associated with Marx. Durkheim thought that to be happy people should attain positions in the division of labor which matched their abilities and aptitudes. The implication is that class-based inequalities in education, training, and access to work should be abolished. Unlike Marx, instead of seeing structural inequalities as endemic to capitalism he chose to see them as temporary features of the pathological state of the division of labor which could be ameliorated by better social regulation.

For Weber, capitalism is "the striving for *profit*, in the course of continuous, rational, capitalist enterprise for *more and more* profits,"¹² and inequalities reflect the life-chances available to people according to the property they own or the skills they can sell in the market. To illustrate the continued relevance of Weber's work, we pointed to the work of Erik Olin Wright and R. Bruce Douglass.¹³ There are some similarities with Marx's theory of class positions, but Weber thought that classes are unlikely to perceive common interests and goals unless they have leadership and an awareness of conflicting interests with other classes. Furthermore, status differences based upon social estimations of honor, lifestyle, and consumption may also militate against common market position leading to a shared class consciousness. Weber concentrated on market situation but, unlike Marx, he ignored the idea of the extraction of surplus value. Contemporary sociologists draw on Weber's ideas to make the argument that ecological problems cannot be understood without making the ideological connections between Christianity, Western rationalism, and environmental domination.

We selected some writing by prominent early feminists. These early social thinkers used their gender as a standpoint from which to expose

what they saw as the androcentrism of “Enlightenment thinking” and early social theory. The classical feminist ideas examined have played an important role in shaping and reshaping contemporary interpretations of gender, and, importantly, their works have influenced many of the educational, legal, and political reforms that have improved opportunities for women and their quality of life. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*, published over 230 years ago, was the first celebrated feminist manifesto.¹⁴ It enunciated the principles of emancipation: an equal education for girls and boys, an end to sexual discrimination, and a right for women to be defined by their profession, not their partner. Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Martineau use the language of slavery to define women’s status. As heirs of the European Enlightenment, these pioneers considered the oppression of White women as connected to the oppression of Black female slaves and of slaves in general in eighteenth-century America. To illustrate the continued relevance of Perkins Gilman’s argument on the nuclear family as a center of women’s subordination and exploitation, we draw attention to research on the gender divide when working from home (WFH) became ubiquitous for many categories of workers during the pandemic.¹⁵ In general terms, Lynn S. Chancer and Beverly Xaviera Watkins argue, new perspectives on gender “have made it virtually impossible to ignore the relationship between gender and other forms of discrimination such as ones based on class and race.”¹⁶ Women’s challenge to the traditional sociological canon has been carried out, from the beginning, as reformers as well as in intellectual ways, grounded in the social experiences that they so eloquently attempted to change.

We also discussed the academic writers of the generation of Durkheim and Weber, that of W.E.B. Du Bois, Georg Simmel, and George Herbert Mead, and thereby further extended the traditional canon. Du Bois made a distinctive contribution to the development of social theory. Race and ethnicity were the axial classic divide for modernizing Western capitalist societies, and this is evident in the case of the United States, argues Mike Savage.¹⁷ Contemporary theories about the social construction of identity, race, and racial inequality can be traced back to the pioneering work of Du Bois, including questions of racial colonialism, racial enslavement, and the role of race in the dehumanization of the African American.¹⁸ Du Bois was witness to and had personal experiences of structured racism, American apartheid, and



Photo 17.1. The employment of Black working-class women as domestics for White upper-class women reveals both commonalities among women and differences between them based on class and race positions. For White middle-class women, the ability to hire other women to do socially devalued household work is status-enhancing. Analyses of the connections between class, gender, and race show the limits of reductionist perspectives on the social world.

Jim Crow laws. His contribution to social theory is highly relevant to contemporary theories on race, multiculturalism, race-based discrimination, and inequality. Race plays a central role in United States politics, a point demonstrated by Barack Obama's election victories. In both presidential elections, 2008 and 2012, race was crucial, with 93 percent of African Americans, 73 percent of Asians, and 71 percent of Latino people voting for Obama.¹⁹ Since 1900, three years before the publication of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Obama is only the fourth Democrat to win two full terms in the White House. Of course, what made Obama's victories exceptional was the color of his skin – his ethnic identity as an African American.

Georg Simmel's work represents a less conventional theoretical reaction to modernity. His sociology shifted the focus toward theorizing mental life in the metropolis, social interaction, money, value, culture,

and cultural production itself.²⁰ His ideas have been refracted into the evolving paradigms of the Chicago school, interaction theory, functionalism, conflict theory, and early postmodernism. Also important was Simmel's influence on Du Bois. His writings on the stranger and his account that the individual "is determined sociologically in the sense that groups 'intersect' in his person by virtue of his affiliation with them"²¹ affected Du Bois's concepts of "two-ness" and "double-consciousness."

Finally, we draw on the work of French-Canadian sociologist Jean-François Côté to examine the legacy of George Herbert Mead. Over the last four decades, sociologists have attached greater importance to Mead's theoretical grasp of the unity of the individual or "micro" social interactions and socializations. We have highlighted a "reconstruction" of Mead's work that focuses on the societal or "macro-sociological" components of Mead's ideas. As such, we have emphasized Mead's dialectic views of the self and society that go well beyond the focus on Blumerian symbolic interactionism to theories of societal self-transformation. Thus, we argue that Mead's theory is relevant today and defines his place in the classical social canon.

CAPITALISM AND SOCIAL THEORY

Theorizing about human society and the human condition is the *raison d'être* of academic sociology. Over the past fifty years, neoliberal capitalism's inherent logic has imposed itself around the globe. In the Global North, protections for workers, for the environment, and for Indigenous lands were dismantled in the name of profit maximization. In this political economy context, Vivek Chibber further notes, it is ironic that at a time when social theorists were theorizing about "grand" or metanarratives and the links between economic structure and the social – the "cultural turn" – the scope of capitalism in the core capitalist countries in the Global North was expanding exponentially by the marketization of previous public services, such as energy, water, and health care. Capitalism expanded with the fall of the Soviet Bloc and when the Chinese government opened its economy to Western investment. By the turn of the millennium, millions of Russian and Chinese workers joined labor markets and, in so doing, placed downward pressure on wages across the Global North.



Photo 17.2. Scottish school students demonstrate in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2019 for action on the climate crisis. The relations between technological development and environmental degradation are deeply interconnected. Do the patterns of extraction and environmental degradation associated with the artificial intelligence industry pose a threat to the survival of the planet?

In *Capital III*, Marx explains the global tendencies of capitalism and the insatiable need to supply European factories with raw materials and constantly expand markets for their commodities. As we explained, Rosa Luxemburg extended Marx’s analysis to point out that, indispensable for capital accumulation, capitalists or their agents had to establish global connections, “[s]ince capitalist production can develop fully *only* with complete access to all territories and climes” (see [chapter 13](#)). The essence of Luxemburg’s polemic is that mature capitalism needs to constantly expand markets across the globe and to colonize overseas territories to extract raw materials for “untrammelled accumulation” – that is, profit maximization. An analysis that Luxemburg would probably endorse, Kate Crawford in her book, *Atlas of AI*, gives an account of modern-day colonialism to

extract rare earth elements to feed the global network of AI systems. She writes:

The massive ecosystem of AI relies on many kinds of extraction: from harvesting the data made from daily activities and expressions, to depleting natural resources, and to exploiting labor around the globe so that this vast planetary network can be built and maintained.²²

Crawford's ground-breaking sociological analysis of AI suggests that the relations between technological development, its materials, labor practices, and environmental degradation are deeply interconnected. The framing of AI as a "clean" technology – as a metaphor like "the cloud" suggests – is beginning to be challenged. The popular narrative fails to recognize that the AI ecosystem is a resource-intensive, extractive technology that causes a sizeable amount of environmental damage. The world's internet and computational infrastructure, such as the cloud, is invisible and abstract, when in fact it is material, "affecting the environment and climate that are far from being fully recognized and accounted for," writes Crawford.²³

In recent years, climatologists and world leaders have labeled climate change an "existential threat." What this means is that human-caused global heating is a threat to the continued existence of our species. The effects of climate change may have once been largely imperceptible and "socially invisible" in the Global North, but as we witnessed in the summer of 2023, widespread floods and forest fires have now moved the climate emergency to the fore of social consciousness, not least because climate-related ecological collapse is increasingly "socially visible."²⁴ Marx prophetically states, "At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance."²⁵ Thus, he addresses a challenge that haunts all thinkers today: how to build a sustainable and just economy without destroying the planet. Jason Hickel argues the need to evolve beyond the canons of capitalism to a new system that is fit for the twenty-first century.²⁶ At the risk of seeming utopian, we hope that the critical social theories discussed in this book will enable readers to contribute better to the debate on the current climate emergency and,

moreover, help to reimagine new economic and social systems that can save the planet.

Increases in carbon emissions are coupled to globalization and capital accumulation. For three decades following World War II, social and economic progress was remarkable in Western Europe and North America. Three decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, much of the optimism of the previous fifty years had faded. Canadian economist and author Jeff Rubin attributed the decline of working families' optimism to neoliberal globalization's significant downstream effects: the expansion of capitalist markets, the access to a seemingly endless supply of cheap labor in the Global South, a dramatic shift in the power of corporate elites and their allies, and, in the Global North, the systematic erosion of protections for workers.²⁷ The downstream effects of globalization were the loss of manufacturing jobs in the Global North as Western corporate executives embraced the ideological line, championed by the influential American economist Milton Friedman, that the one and only one social responsibility of business is to maximize profits.²⁸ The *leitmotif* of the 1980s' global capitalism can be seen in the 1987 Hollywood film *Wall Street*, with Michael Douglas's character, an unscrupulous corporate raider, declaring that "greed is good."

Pursuing this doctrine, Western corporations adopted a new business model called "offshoring" – directing the production of commodities to low-wage countries in the Global East and South. This aspect of global capitalism became known as "Nikefication," in recognition of the US company that pioneered manufacturing its products offshore in Vietnam.²⁹ In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein provides a critical account of offshoring – a focus on "branding" and the relocation of manufacturing capacity from the core advanced capitalist economies:

The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multinational corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s, that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products ... The very process of producing – running one's own factories, being responsible for the tens of thousands of full-time, permanent employees – began to look less like the route to success and more like a clunky liability.³⁰

The cumulative effects of what Bernie Sanders calls “the uber-capitalist economic system” have impoverished millions of Americans.³¹ As economists Anne Case and Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton observe, “something is going on ... that is particularly toxic for the working class.”³² The message is that if we want to understand why a growing number of young people and the working poor are on precarious zero-hours contracts (ZHCs) and experience insecurity and extreme inequality, we need a dialogue between the present and the past, how social theories born in different historical periods and cultures transmit and endure as active ingredients in contemporary public discourses. This path of interrogation necessitates sociologists to start by asking, as the Ancient Romans did, “*Qui bono?*” (Who benefits and how?) from unfettered neoliberalism. We suggest that it also involves the application of social concepts developed by the authors we have examined in this book. Next, we examine this era of inequality.

THE AGE OF EXTREME INEQUALITY: CLASS, GENDER, AND RACE

The twenty-first century marks the arrival of inequality which became a way of summarizing a basket of social problems that could be linked to the neoliberal project unleashed across the globe. In 2013, US President Barack Obama opined that income inequality is “the defining challenge of our time.”³³ The revelatory books *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Trouble with Billionaires* by Linda McQuaig and Neil Brooks, and *The Return of Inequality* by Mike Savage³⁴ provide a contemporary snapshot of class-based social inequality. Their key argument is that more unequal societies proliferate social problems and therefore that more equality is better for everyone; while it might seem logical, as the 1 percent corporate elites argue, to assume that the more prosperous the wealthy are the more likely they will be to support policies that help the poor, the record shows the opposite. When inequality is most extreme, the poor fare worse, a phenomenon called the “Robin Hood paradox.” Savage notes that when *The Spirit Level* was published, it caused “a huge stir” because the authors “made no bones about its mission,”³⁵ thus challenging the view we highlighted in the introduction when we discussed the history of American sociology:

there is a distinction between advocacy and objectivity, and sociologists should avoid the former.

The data on income inequality are staggering. From the fall of the Berlin Wall, the traditional cleavage between rich and poor began to widen. In the 1970s, CEOs of major American corporations were paid, on average, about 20 times as much as the average worker. By the 2000s, incomes had skewed, and CEOs were paid more than 300 times as much as the average worker.³⁶ Compared to other European countries, Britain has a notably high level of income inequality. After direct taxes and benefits, the poorest 10 percent had an average disposable income of £9,644 (US\$14,755) in 2015–16 while the richest 10 percent had nine times that: £83,875 (US\$128,328).³⁷ While millions endured austerity, stagnant wages, and the shrinkage of social support systems, households in the top 10 percent of disposable income saw their income from property, interest, and dividends double between 2010–11 and 2015–16, from an average of £19,000 (US\$29,070) each to more than £38,000 (US\$58,140) – well above the average household income of around £25,000 (US\$38,250) in 2015–16.

The shift of the growing share of income to the top 1 percent has meant that ordinary families have failed to share in economic progress, and, less tangibly, it has meant “a loss of our sense of living in a shared society,” Klugman opines.³⁸ In this age of neoliberalism, the United States, Britain, and Canada have become extremely unequal with virtually all the income growth going to the top 1 percent since 2008.³⁹ In 2018, for example, the wealth of Jeff Bezos (founder and CEO of Amazon) exceeded \$129 billion, making him the world’s wealthiest man. Bezos’s fortune increases by roughly US\$353,000 per minute. In contrast, Marx would not be surprised to learn that Amazon full-time workers in the United States make an average of less than US\$15.00 an hour, and as little as US\$233 per month in India, and that British workers experienced the “worse pay freeze for 200 years.”⁴⁰ Inequality is the essence of Marx’s theory of exploitation. It is an innate feature of the capital-labor relationship itself – the buying and selling of labor power. The capitalist who refuses to engage in the exploitation of workers will most likely lose out to competitors who close their eyes to such issues. The free-market capitalist system preserves those who accept the primacy of profit maximization, as advocated by Milton Friedman, and it makes losers of those who do not. The only way to step out of the

system is to change it. Unfettered capitalism “is an amoral system that requires rules, and neoliberalism dismantled the guardrails that keep capitalism from turning into a casino,” writes Omer Aziz.⁴¹ After more than four decades of neoliberalism and recognition of the fact that the doctrine is increasingly deleterious to the natural world and the living standards of the many, radical critiques of neoliberal capitalism have acquired fashionable relevance.

Since the publication of the third edition of this book, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken modern-day capitalism to its core. In 2020, Britain’s economy, for example, experienced the biggest contraction in annual GDP since the Great Frost in 1709.⁴² Amid the upheaval caused by the coronavirus crisis, neoliberal political orthodoxy was turned upside down. In order to sustain the economy and society, Western governments dramatically intervened in four policy and institutional domains: work and labor markets, public and private finance, border and surveillance, and education.⁴³ The scale of the unemployment crisis provoked governments to place millions of workers on “furlough,” a system of employment income protection. It also prompted unprecedented government and central bank interventions in financial and labor markets to ensure the economic and financial system was kept afloat. The effect was to increase public and private debt. As the virus spread around the world, governments enhanced, accelerated, and enforced new exclusionary (racialized), digital and physical border infrastructures. In education, face-to-face teaching and learning in enclosed spaces were replaced by online learning. The switch exposed deep social inequalities and class dynamics in society, not simply because of the digital divide, but due to unequal access to informal social resources on which education implicitly depends. Here we briefly examine the intersection of inequality between class, gender, and race through data relating to the coronavirus pandemic.

We feel this sojourn into the COVID-19 crisis is helpful for three reasons. First, in terms of sheer scale of the catastrophe, the deadly virus impacted virtually all countries and all members of society. Second, and important for our argument on inequality, it is worthwhile to observe and learn from the crisis: what endures, what values become important, what occupations are crucial to sustain us when the normal economic and social milieu is abruptly suspended, and what were the effects of the pandemic on different members of society? The COVID-19 crisis offers

Table 17.1. COVID-19 pandemic case and death rates in the European Union and by selective countries

Country	Confirmed Cases	Confirmed Deaths
Europe	240,211,364	2,048,153
UK	23,304,931	183,953
France	32,768,452	148,462
Germany	30,787,309	143,855
United States	89,803,788	1,018,670
Canada	4,023,104	42,477
Brazil	33,704,393	677,804
South Africa	4,004,201	101,977
India	43,979,730	526,258
Republic of Korea	19,620,517	24,992

Note: Data as of August 1, 2022.
Source: WHO. Available at www.who.int/countries/#U.

extraordinary insights into inequality and underscores the relevance of concepts from the classical canon. Third, the effects of the pandemic upon society and the human condition are obviously an area of theory and inquiry which is of enormous significance for sociology.

The early chronology of the coronavirus remains mired in controversy. But we do know that by April 2020 the virus had established a presence in the populations of Asia, Europe, and North and South America. By November 2021, the world passed through the somber milestone of five million COVID-19 deaths. The pandemic caused suffering and death in over 200 countries and territories. While imperfect, from the onset daily case counts provided a metric for measuring the spread of the virus. Table 17.1 shows the number of confirmed cases and deaths in the European Union and selected countries. On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization stated that COVID-19 no longer constituted a global health emergency, and it downgraded the “alert” status while warning that if the situation were to change it could be reinstated. At the time of the announcement, it was still killing someone every three minutes. To date, the virus has killed almost 7 million people over a period of almost three years, made hundreds of millions ill, and left about 1-in-10 of those infected with long COVID-19, which can last for years in some people.⁴⁴

Across North America and Europe, the pandemic caused the worst public health crisis in living memory. In pre-COVID-19 United States, despite spending almost as twice as much per capita on health care as Canada, Britain, or France, the US health care system ranks close to the bottom of major industrialized nations in outcomes: longevity, accessibility, efficiency, and equity.⁴⁵ The United States is the most economically unequal of the G7 countries, and accounts for 4.25 percent of the total world population. During the COVID-19 crisis, it suffered one of the highest numbers of deaths of any nation; the number of COVID-19-related deaths was equivalent to wiping out every man, woman, and child in the three cities of Chicago, Houston, and Philadelphia. In sharp contrast, both Finland's and Denmark's populations are equivalent of 0.07 percent of the world's population but about 0.02 percent (1,444) and 0.06 percent (3,030) of the worldwide COVID-19-related deaths, respectively.⁴⁶ The data points to a higher death rate in those countries which most closely embrace the neoliberal ideology of free markets.⁴⁷ Data suggests that the "Anglo-American" model of capitalism pulled social inequalities even wider during the pandemic.⁴⁸

The pandemic, like the climate crisis, is a global problem. It exposed glaring failures and cruelties in the global capitalist economic system. Moreover, class, gender, and race determined the way people experienced the health crisis in North America and Britain. The pandemic occurred against a background of growing economic inequality. Parallel with the redistribution of wealth has been the growing disparity between the life expectancy of wealthy Americans and low-income earners. Readers will not be surprised that the life expectancy differential for Black and low-income American males living in poor neighborhoods compared to White males living in affluent communities can be as high as twenty-seven years. As Sanders persuasively argues, "the United States is experiencing a life-expectancy crisis."⁴⁹

The lethal virus soon exposed class inequalities in the world's richest economies. Metaphors were common to describe social cleavages: "Coronavirus is like an X-ray of society," and mainstream media commentators observed that "[t]hey tell us coronavirus is a great leveler – it's not."⁵⁰ The pandemic radically transformed the spatial organization of work. Those with higher qualifications and incomes were more likely to work from home, while only 5 percent of workers with no qualifications on lower income reported working from home.⁵¹ In 2019,

12 percent of working adults in Britain reported working from home for some part of the week; by the first half of 2020 the figure increased to 49 percent.⁵² The option of working from home was available for professional and many administrative workers. In contrast, in Britain, Canada, and the United States, millions of “essential” workers, such as caring, nursing, postal workers, bus and train drivers, supermarket workers, building and manufacturing workers had no choice but to continue working and run the risk of catching the virus. As William Davies and his colleagues observe, COVID-19 presented us with “a new language and moral validation” of what constitutes “essential” work, and the discrepancy with its remuneration,⁵³ and what, in the memorable words of anthropologist David Graeber, constitutes “bullshit jobs” that were performed in the relatively safe space of home.

Precarious work and poverty kill people. Tens of thousands of essential workers died because they lacked the privilege and wealth that would allow them to choose to stay at home.⁵⁴ In the United States, workers have health coverage through their employer. During the COVID-19 crisis, as millions of workers lost their jobs, they also lost their health care coverage. In Britain, some key workers were vulnerable to infection and as a result, overall, this led to COVID-19 “mortality rates that *are twice as high* in sectors that are synonymous with insecure work.”⁵⁵ Evaluating the data, public health researcher Devi Sridhar summed up the racial and class nature of mortality rates:

As data has increasingly been analyzed on who is most affected by COVID-19, three clear risk factors for death were: coming from a deprived background; being from a racial or ethnic minority group; and having an occupation such as cleaner, security guard, taxi driver, social care or health care worker.... Instead of being the great equalizer, COVID-19 pulled back the veil and revealed one set of rules for elites and another for essential workers.⁵⁶

Concern with gender inequalities and COVID-19 has largely focused on women’s loss of work and the impact of the pandemic on women’s mental health. In Britain, the pandemic had particularly destructive effects on women in terms of health, employment, and unpaid work, contributing to increasing poverty and debt and declining mental health.⁵⁷ Research by the Fawcett Society drew attention to women’s

loss of work in Britain.⁵⁸ In the United States, millions are dying from what is called “physiology of poverty.” In essence, the poor are unable to access affordable health care.⁵⁹ A global study based on data sets from 193 countries between March 2020 and September 2021 found that COVID-19 exacerbated existing economic inequalities. According to the study, 26 percent of women reported loss of work compared with 20 percent of men. This disparity was attributed to women working disproportionately in sectors harder hit by COVID-19, such as hospitality. A study investigating professional counsellors working from home during the pandemic further illustrates gender disparities. Focusing on space, interface, and pace of work, Jennifer O’Neil and her colleagues found that such work types introduce an increased level of emotional complexity for counsellors – overwhelmingly female – with more domestic responsibilities, which resulted in “stress, exhaustion, and burnout.”⁶⁰ That women take on more domestic responsibilities, women are more likely to give up work to care for other family members, and women and girls were more likely to drop out of education are findings that would not have surprised American social theorist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. When asked about gender-based violence, 54 percent of women compared with 44 percent of men perceived that it had increased during the pandemic.⁶¹ A Canadian study also reported an increase in intimate partner violence, which is a leading cause of homelessness.⁶² Research also found a decrease in mental well-being following the onset of the pandemic. Respondents referred to an increase in loneliness because of reduced social interaction.⁶³

Soon after COVID-19 first took hold across societies, its unequal socioeconomic and mortality consequences for minority racial and ethnic groups were tangible. People from ethnic minority backgrounds were more at risk of infection, hospitalization, and death from COVID-19. Data were published in the United States and Britain showing that the ratio for American Indians and Alaskan Native People was 1.6 times greater compared to Whites. For Asians the ratio was 0.8 greater, for African Americans the ratio was 1.1 greater, and for Hispanic or Latino persons 1.5. For the same groups, hospitalization was 2.5, 0.7, 2.1, and 1.8 times greater, respectively. For death the same groups were 2.0, 0.7, 1.6, and 1.7 times greater, respectively.⁶⁴ Poverty and racial discrimination have been identified as exacerbating the health consequences of COVID-19. Black and ethnic minorities in the United States are most

likely to live in poverty, to have no health coverage, and to suffer historic and ongoing discrimination which affects the operation of health policy and institutions.

Black and ethnic minorities are affected by greater preexisting health challenges such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease; reduced access (or no access in the case of African Americans) to health care; lower quality neighborhood and housing conditions; and unequal exposure to high-risk occupations.⁶⁵ People from ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK were also affected disproportionately by COVID-19. A report of a committee chaired by Lady Doreen Lawrence explained the effects of decades of structural injustice, inequality, and discrimination on these communities. Lawrence's report also referred to the overrepresentation of people from ethnic minority backgrounds in public-facing occupations preventing them from working from home, and in their residence in overcrowded housing. Finally, Lawrence alleged that the British government had failed to facilitate COVID-19-secure workplaces.⁶⁶

Our journey through the works of the classical social theorists is now ending. The primary aim of this chapter is to emphasize the connections between class, gender, and race and the economic and social outcomes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our central argument goes beyond the COVID-19 crisis; it is that classical social theory provides powerful conceptual tools for analyzing late modernity and for formulating research questions and engaging in debates on work, organizations, artificial intelligence, women's subordination and oppression, cultural identity, racial profiling, multiculturalism, globalization, and climate breakdown. The entire scaffolding of this book rests on the dual axes around which sociological research and discourses revolve – social order and social change. What accounts for patterns of behavior that lead us to experience social life as stable? What are the sources of conflict in modern society, and what motivates people, individually or collectively, to act? These are enduring questions for social theorists, and we hold that the search for answers will bring each new generation of critical sociologists to the classical theorists we have discussed at length in this book.

Notes

Preface

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17. The Classical Canon in an Age of Inequality

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