

# I

## Key Ideas About the Social World

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If you pay attention to recurring messages in the popular media, you might easily get the idea that our world is in the process of changing dramatically. You might sense that the past is rapidly disappearing as we cross the threshold into an entirely new era. From cheerleaders of the future, the message we get is that on one side of the divide are all the old, bankrupt ideas that have made our world so messy and dangerous, whereas on the other side are the brilliant new ideas that will usher us into utopia. From the prophets of doom, you get the opposite sense of where we have been and where we are heading. They usually have a positive, if romanticized, view of the past and its presumed values (commitment to family, community spirit, work ethic, etc.), and they envision a future devoid of such virtues. Not surprisingly, they view what is ahead with considerable foreboding.

Both views have many popularizers. And the issues these popularizers speak to have attracted the attention of a number of perceptive commentators. Perhaps you have seen the following titles on library shelves, in bookstores, or online:

*Runaway World*

*Hot, Flat, and Crowded*

*Consumed*

*Democracy Incorporated*

## 2 Key Ideas in Sociology

*The Clash of Civilizations*

*The End of Work*

*War Without End*

*The End of History and the Last Man*

*The Age of Discontinuity*

*The Age of Unreason*

*The Jobless Future*

*The Twilight of Common Dreams*

*The Twilight of American Culture*

*The New World Order*

*The Coming Information Age*

*The Closing of the American Mind*

*Powershift*

*Bobos in Paradise*

*Jihad vs. McWorld*

Do titles such as these make you feel curious, a little excited, or apprehensive? Realize that the authors intended to provoke such responses, in part because they help sell books. Realize, too, that you and your contemporaries are not the first to feel this way about trends in the social world. Over 150 years ago, the intellectual forerunners of contemporary sociology began examining the rapid and far-ranging changes occurring in their world and wondered why those changes were happening and where they were heading. This was the beginning of a tradition of sociological searching for answers to questions about social change.

Each succeeding generation was stimulated by the ways its predecessors attempted to understand their own particular historical situations. Those generations borrowed ideas from those who came before them, adapting those ideas to the new circumstances that characterized their own times. In fact, the ideas expressed in the preceding titles are essentially variations and extensions of, and reactions to, contemporary social events as well as a tradition of social thought. This book is about some of the major ideas that have developed out of that tradition. It examines their origins, their development, and their relevance at the dawn of the 21st century.

## Conceptualizing Contemporary Society

In this book, we examine four key ideas that have played a central role in discourse about the nature of society. Specifically, in Chapters 2 through 5, we explore the meaning and significance of the following ideas: industrial society, democracy, individualism, and modernity. In the final chapter, we turn to the significance of globalization and suggest ways in which sociology is called upon to reorient its historic tendency to treat “society” as a reference to the nation-state by moving beyond this perspective to grasp the significance of an emerging global order (or, as some would describe it, disorder). These ideas can be seen as key because they help supply us with insights into major social trends and assist us in seeing how those trends influence all facets of our lives (Williams 1976; Elias 1978; Shils 1981; Seidman 1983; Wolfe 1995; Bauman and May 2001).

These ideas, of course, cannot stand alone. First, they are interconnected. Thus, for example, we cannot appreciate the nature of democracy in American society today without an awareness of the nature of individualism. Some versions of individualism, which encourage the single-minded pursuit of self-interest, can work against people acting collectively in political life to advance the common good. This, obviously, has significant implications for the way democracy will look and function.

Second, these four central ideas have been further refined and shaped by a variety of other consequential ideas. In each chapter, ancillary ideas that are closely related to the four master ideas, and that have added new dimensions of understanding, are also discussed. Among the concepts that are examined are alienation, technology, capitalism, socialism, social class, citizenship, civil society, bureaucracy, and community.

With an awareness of both the interconnections of the four key concepts and the role played by a number of other important ideas, a brief preview of Chapters 2 through 5 follows.

### Industrial Society

Chapter 2 introduces the ways in which a number of important sociological thinkers from the 19th century to the present have attempted to make sense of industrial society, identifying both its promise and its problems. As you will see, the Industrial Revolution signaled the advent of a new type of economic system that proved to be extraordinarily innovative, dynamic, and productive. In its relatively short history, industrial society has transformed work, the class structure, communication and transportation systems, leisure, patterns of consumption, our homes—in short, all

facets of our lives. Most of us would not want to return to a preindustrial world because we realize that our lives are far more comfortable because of industrialization.

We also realize, however, that industrialization has a downside. Workers frequently view their employers as exploiters and their jobs as degrading and alienating. At the same time, they fear that, because of the dynamism of this type of economic system, their livelihoods are never secure. Industrial society has generated serious environmental problems and new kinds of risks. There is a wasteful and destructive side to industrial society. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to explore the dual-edged nature of industrial society in the context of how the thinking about it has evolved during the past two centuries.

## Democracy

The American and French revolutions marked the beginning of a shift in the way people thought about government and its relation to the governed. The democratic era marked the end of the age of absolutism, in which monarchs identified themselves with the state and in which the people were seen merely as subjects of the crown. Democracy changed this by investing ultimate authority in the citizenry, with government being redefined as an institution intended to reflect and represent its interests. Throughout the 19th century, democracy took root and expanded in the countries of Western Europe and in North America—precisely those countries that were also witnessing the emergence of capitalist industrial society. By the 20th century, democratic ideals were sufficiently powerful so that even manifestly undemocratic political regimes such as the former Soviet Union claimed to be democratic. Democracy, however, did not manage to take root in some places, and, in nations where it did, antidemocratic forces sometimes undermined it, as in the case of Nazi Germany.

The political history of the past two centuries has prompted sociologists to attempt to ascertain the preconditions that make democracy possible as well as to discover the major threats to democratic systems. In trying to address these issues, they have also dealt with many related questions: Are ordinary people actually fit to govern? What is their proper role in the political arena? What kinds of leaders are needed in a democracy? Can democracy survive contemporary challenges to it? How has democracy shaped gender relations and vice versa? Similarly, how has democracy shaped race relations and vice versa? Sociologists have been pondering these and related questions since the 19th century, and we examine the insights of some of the most prominent of these thinkers in Chapter 3.

## Individualism

Chapter 4 shifts ground from large, macrolevel concerns to the social psychological realm. As you will learn, America was the birthplace of contemporary ideas about individualism, and because of this we tend—often unwittingly—to view the world through the lens of an individualistic worldview. Individualism in our culture is generally seen in a positive light, conjuring up notions of personal autonomy and self-reliance. Individualism, however, also has a darker side.

Individualism recasts the way people define their ties to community and to other people outside the orbit of family and friends. This has broad implications. An example of this is seen in a letter that Robert Bellah, one of the sociologists discussed in Chapter 4, sent to former President Clinton, criticizing him for signing a new welfare bill into law. The bill was designed to prevent people from remaining on welfare for extended periods of time. According to its proponents, the rationale for this legislation was that poor people need to take responsibility for their own lives. In his letter, Bellah (1996), assuming the mantle of a public sociologist, contended, “We know that this punitive legislation is popular because it resonates with the radical individualism that has long been part of our culture” (p. 65). Why did he believe this legislation was punitive, and in what ways did he see individualism as a culprit? Chapter 4, by providing an overview of the history of individualism, provides a clearer sense of what Bellah is claiming and will help you judge whether you agree with him.

## Modernity

In Chapter 5, we build on the preceding chapters and return to the big picture, this time focusing on culture. It is not always easy to define what it means to be modern, but at the outset of the chapter, we work through a provisional understanding of the central features of modern culture. As you will see, modern culture cannot be understood without appreciating the way it has been shaped by industrialization, democracy, and individualism. As you will also see, however, modern culture is more than the result of these influences, and it has a reciprocal impact on them.

The topic of modernity is approached from several angles, including money, fashion, urban life, the mass media, and mass entertainment. Moreover, by entering into the controversial debates about postmodernism, you will get a sense of how modernity has evolved and how contemporary social theorists are attempting to make sense of the cultural transformations we are living through.

After reading these four chapters, you will appreciate the importance of these key ideas in their own right and have a better understanding of how they are interconnected. Furthermore, you will realize that these ideas not only were useful in understanding the past but also have contemporary relevance.

## Careers of Ideas

Although we understand that people have careers, it is not so obvious that ideas about the nature of society do also. As you will see, ideas have careers insofar as they are used over an extended period to help us comprehend major social trends. Ideas are formulated, elaborated, refined, and revised by particular individuals, but the ideas nonetheless manage to take on lives of their own. Thus, they need to be understood on their own terms.

The individuals who developed these ideas inhabited particular times and places. In return, the ideas developed in partial response to the immediate intellectual and social concerns and interests of those individuals. This book traces the careers of the four ideas identified previously as they have been articulated by several eminent thinkers. I have not attempted to include everyone who has ever written anything of importance about industrial society, democracy, individualism, or modernity. Nor am I suggesting that the work of any particular person discussed in this book can be reduced simply to one of the four ideas. In fact, it is fair to say that for Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and their intellectual heirs, all four master ideas are woven in one way or another into the overall fabric of their work (Becker 1971; Giddens 1971; Hawthorn 1976; Aron 1985; Mazlish 1989; Wallerstein 1991). This should not be surprising because, as noted previously, these ideas are indeed interconnected.

To demonstrate the enduring significance and relevance of these ideas, I frequently discuss the circumstances in which they were formulated. The focus on particular thinkers' lives is not intended to provide comprehensive biographies of these individuals but, rather, to highlight some of the events that may have affected the meaning and significance attached to particular ideas over time. In other words, the ways ideas are modified, transformed, and reappropriated is a matter of central concern when we decide to investigate their careers (Hughes 1961, 1975; Williams 1976; Kivisto 1989; Sica 1989; Bourdieu 1993).

*Reappropriated* is an important word to consider. The previously mentioned four seminal thinkers are proverbial dead white males, as indeed is true for most of their peers. Succeeding generations of scholars instrumental

in shaping the course of the discipline were also largely white and male, and when they looked to the sociological canon, they looked especially to this quartet. Without denigrating the significance of their work, this is also an expression of the legacy of sexism and racism that contemporary sociology inherits. It is, fortunately, also a legacy that the discipline is combating and gradually overcoming. One way it is doing so is by seeking at last to begin the process of appropriating the thought of long-neglected people of color and women. I think, for example, of scholars such as Harriet Martineau, Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W. E. B. Du Bois, and C. L. R. James. Second, in the wake of the civil rights movement and the women's movement of the 1960s, both people of color and women have begun to achieve places of prominence in the discipline where they have been so long denied. They are at this moment writing a new chapter in the history of sociology.

## Key Ideas and the Field of Sociology

The key ideas discussed in this book have significance beyond the confines of sociology. For example, industrialization has special meaning for economists, whereas literary scholars are keenly interested in the impact of modernity on literature. We, however, are primarily interested in these ideas because they have played a central role in sociology. In fact, the four individuals most associated with the four key ideas—Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel—are often considered the classic founders of the field of sociology (Bannister 1987; Ross 1991; Horowitz 1993; Giddens 1995a).

The scope and persistence of these central concepts demonstrate the fact that sociology is the most ambitious of the social sciences. Its self-appointed task is nothing less than to add to our understanding of the major trends that have given shape to the modern world. Its subject matter includes the institutions singled out for attention by economics and political science as well as the family, religion, education, or, in short, the entire realm of what is frequently referred to as civil society (Therborn 1976; Gurnah and Scott 1992; Wolfe 1993, 1995; Edwards 2004; Alexander 2006). Like psychology, sociology attempts to understand the individual, but sociology does so by locating the person in social settings and by attempting to understand the complex ways in which society and the individual impinge on and reciprocally shape each other.

Sociology is also ambitious methodologically. Sociologists sometimes pattern themselves after natural scientists, using quantitative methodologies in the hopes of establishing a genuinely predictive science (Haskell 1977; Vidich and Lyman 1985; Bannister 1987; Giddens 1987; Ross 1991). These

sociologists have frequently been interested in offering the findings of social research to political leaders with the intention that research results will be used to formulate public policy (Halliday and Janowitz 1992).

Other sociologists emphasize interpretation rather than prediction (Brown 1989; Wolfe 1993). These sociologists take into account the conceptual undergirdings of the people they are investigating, employing a variety of qualitative methods. Some of their work, such as the best writing produced by ethnographers, bears a distinct affinity with literature or narrative history (Nisbet 1976; Lepenies 1988; Brown 1989). Thus, it is fair to say that, from this perspective, sociology is a social science with one foot in the humanities.

The first flowering of a science of society occurred during a period of dramatic social change. The founders of the discipline lived in what is customarily referred to as the “age of revolution,” the period during which economic and political change swept first across Europe and North America and then throughout the globe. Political revolutions produced a new democratic sensibility and, with it, an awareness of what it meant to be a citizen. The Industrial Revolution spelled the end of the feudal era and the triumph of capitalist market economies. The age of revolution, however, spilled over into other areas of life: science, art, literature, religion, social institutions, and human relations (Hobsbawm 1962).

The founders of the sociological enterprise sought to make sense of this transition from one social order to another while living through it. In this undertaking, they are no different from contemporary sociologists or, for that matter, you and me. We are all attempting to understand the dynamics of present-day trends and, in so doing, perhaps glimpse what the future holds.

## Tools for Understanding Social Trends

Sociologists seek to explain why, how, and in what circumstances certain phenomena do or do not occur. For this task, they use tools called theories. Theories are simply mental constructs; they are assemblages of words. Whether we are aware of it or not, we all use theories in everyday life. Everyday theories and sociological theories, however, are different. Everyday theory is formulated off-the-cuff as we go about our daily lives. This type of theory is often formulated only implicitly and is taken for granted rather than subjected to critical questioning. We do not try to scientifically determine whether our theory holds up in all circumstances. In contrast, sociological theory strives (a) to be as explicit as possible, (b) to avoid logical contradictions



or absurdities, and (c) to ascertain whether the ideas square with empirical reality. Sociological theories are held only provisionally, pending evidence that proves them right or wrong, and are viewed with a critical eye (Wolfe 1996).

One becomes a social theorist when something is askew in the realm of knowledge, when current explanations are perceived to fail, or when existing theories appear to be inadequate tools in the task of comprehension. Theoretical work is simply an attempt to explain, and thus to assist in understanding, the social world. Sociology's central concern is to view societies at any particular point in their history in terms of the distinctive structures and processes that shape their character at that moment. These were the concerns of the four classic sociologists whose ideas are discussed in this book. They witnessed social change that could not be explained by existing theories and set out to find workable explanations.

For such inquiry, social theorists rely on others' ideas, which provide the basis for common understanding and produce a genuinely collective enterprise. In other words, theories are constructed by individuals operating within a community of scholars, including not only their contemporaries but also theorists from the past. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel built their theories on the thought of their predecessors and were continually influenced by the theories of their contemporaries.

Similarly, as we today try to understand the major trends of our time, we need to take into account industrial society, democracy, individualism, and modernity—key ideas articulated initially in the 19th century and continually developed and reshaped throughout the 20th century. We need to be knowledgeable about the past, including past efforts at understanding, if we are to comprehend the present (Seidman 1983; Sztompka 1993). We can profit greatly by considering the four key ideas discussed in this book, building on the insights of generations past and present who wanted to understand their own societies and who shaped the tools of inquiry to assist in that task. At the same time, in the early years of the 21st century, we are increasingly aware of the varied impacts of globalization. As Chapter 6 illustrates, this complex and contested phenomenon is forcing us to reconfigure our key ideas in significant ways. Our task is to build on the sociological tradition to assist us in making sense of the profound changes that will confront us in the future.