CHAPTER 1

Beginning to See

A Sociological Core

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Most people enjoy a story with a good plot, one with a strong beginning and clear resolve at the end. Yet it's equally true that the vast majority of stories don't start with any sort of *true* beginning. The opening of a story is not natural or predetermined; rather it depends on the story itself, the central characters in it, and who's telling it, too. It's a little bit like the story of your life. Where does it begin? Your *true* beginning lies in the distant past, when your ancestors moved from one continent to another; when your distant relatives were conceived; and those precarious moments when your grandparents and parents met, when they moved past the awkwardness of new relationships and into the bonds that brought forth children. While a lot of that may be very interesting, it's not really the story of your life—at least, not with you as the central character.

The same sort of thing is true about the book you now hold. Its beginning goes all the way back to when the first person ever thought about social things.

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But telling that tale would take a very long time and in the end, it wouldn't be that interesting: too many plots and characters, and far too much going on to make any kind of sense out of it. So, I'm telling a shorter tale—but even so, I'm choosing a few characters and story lines from a vast array. I'm beginning our story with the Enlightenment and modernity. While that may seem academically dry, people in the Enlightenment asked some amazing questions, such as, what is reality? What is human nature? How can we be sure that what we know is true? Even more interesting is that this story is *your* story. Now, I admit I'm extending your life story further back than your date of birth. However, if you've learned anything about sociology thus far, you know that the social context wherein you were born is really important. For example, if you're black, it matters if you were born in the United States in 1780 or 1980; your life chances and the story you could tell about your life would be utterly different.

What the story of modernity and the Enlightenment are going to give you is what C. Wright Mills calls *the sociological imagination,* the ability to see how society, history, and personal narratives intersect. Mills (1959) tells us that the very first thing you see with the sociological imagination is the real you: "The first fruit of this imagination . . . is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his [historical] period" (p. 5). I hope that by the end of this book, you'll see that the effects of these social forces go deep; they influence how we think, feel, and act, as well as what we value and what we know.

In this book, you'll learn about various theorists and what they had to say about society. There are other themes in the book as well. Sometimes they will be explicit, but they will always be there percolating in the background, even if I don't point them out. These themes or plot lines are the story of sociology as a modern way of knowing, the story of democracy as a central theme in modernity, and the story of the modern person (that would be you). As with any good book, you're going to find that these stories or characters are not free from conflict; they aren't things that just sit there without moving or changing. Change is endemic in human affairs, and thus society and people are organic in the sense that they are never quite the same from one moment to the next. My intent in telling you these stories is to invite you to have eyes to see the social world in which you live, move, and have your being. Every character in this book—including such things as the Enlightenment and modernity—invites us to see the social world in a different way. Revising this book is always a joy for me because I invariably find new perspectives and different ways of seeing. I hope you find these stories we're about to share to be as fascinating as I do.

The Making of Modernity and the Modern Way of Knowing

The words *modern* and *modernity* are used in a number of different ways. Sometimes modern is used in the same way as contemporary or up-to-date. Other times it's used as an adjective, as in modern art or modern architecture. In the social sciences, there has been a good bit of debate about the idea of modernity. Some argue that we

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are no longer modern; others that we never were; and still others that we are living in some different form of modernity, like liquid modernity. We're not going to enter into this debate directly here, but the existence of the debate is important for us. It's important because this debate has implications for the kind of person we can be and the kind of society in which we live. In this book, we're going to begin thinking about society and our place in it using a specific view of modernity, one that assumes a rational actor and an ordered world that can be directed. It's important for you to know that this approach to understanding modernity and knowledge is simply our beginning; it's our touchstone, the place from which we will organize our thinking.

As a social, historical period, modernity began in the seventeenth century and was marked by significant social change, such as massive movements of populations from rural communities to large urban settings, an increased division of labor, the rise of economic markets and bureaucratic institutions, and large-scale integration through national identities. In general, the defining elements of modernity are nation-states and democracy, capitalism, science, and mass media; the historical moments that set the stage for modernity are the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Reformation, the American and French Revolutions, and the Industrial Revolution. We'll be thinking further about most of these throughout our time together, but for now I'd like you to see that as a result of these factors, a new *zeitgeist,* a new "spirit of the age," came into existence. It was in this age that our modern beliefs in reason, empiricism, progress, and equality began.

Enduring Issues

Epistemology—the study of how we know things—has been a thorny issue for people who think about such things for millennia. But with the rise of science in the nineteenth century, it has become even more important because science claims a better control over knowledge and its conditions. The usual issues, as we'll see in Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, concern the way the object of a study exists (ontology) and the appropriate way to study such an object (epistemology). Other issues became equally important as the social and behavioral sciences developed. Some contemporary feminists argue that because science creates objective knowledge, it denies the subjective experiences of women and minorities (see P. H. Collins, 2000; D. E. Smith, 1987).

One of the earmarks of the modern era is *intentionality.* It began with ideas and theories of human nature, knowledge, and what society could and should be; these ideas were then purposely used to improve the human condition. Some of the clearest examples of this purposefulness can be found in such political documents as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and the French and U.S. Constitutions. Those documents are based on theories and philosophies of natural law and human nature; they intentionally and legally set up specific relationships among social institutions and citizens.

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Institutions of Modernity

One of the most notable institutional changes concerned religion. Prior to modernity, religion occupied the central position in society as a whole and in government specifically. This dominance of religion dates back to 140 BCE in the East, with Emperor Wu of Han and Confucianism, and 313 CE in the West, with Constantine and Christianity. The modern age is marked by the intentional separation of church and state. This separation is necessary because democracy cannot function under absolute truth and legitimation, which is what religion does for government. A government that is legitimated by religion cannot be questioned; to do so would be to question God. Thus, a *theocracy* (rule by God) is the polar opposite of a *democracy* (rule by the people). In a theocracy, the power to rule goes from the top (God) down; in a democracy, the power to rule comes from the bottom (citizens) up. However, while it's true there needs to be a separation, it's also clear by looking at early social thinkers and sociologists that this separation did not necessarily mean that religion wasn't important or would go away.

Religion was separated out so that government could change. Prior to modernity, the primary form of government in Western Europe was feudalism, which was based on land tenure and personal relationships. These relationships, and thus the land, were organized around the monarchy with clear social, hereditary divisions between royalty and peasants. Therefore, the experience of the everyday person in feudal Europe was one where personal obligations and one's relationship to the land were paramount. Every person was keenly aware of his or her obligations to the lord of the land. These were seen as a kind of familial relationship, with fidelity as its chief goal.

The quintessential form of government in modernity is the democratic nation-state, whose chief goal is to protect the freedom and sovereignty of the individual. This can be seen as one of the most astonishing aspects of this period: *Modernity is founded on a specific view of and belief in the person.* One easy way to see this is through the different sorts of political actors feudalism and democracy assume. The majority of people in a feudalistic state are *subjects;* the majority in a democracy are *citizens.* The distinctions are not incidental—subjects are *subjected* to power; citizens *hold* power—nor are these distinctions merely outward. They imply something about how the individual experiences his or her life—subjects must be cared for and guided; citizens must use reason to guide society. Further, this idea of the reasoning, responsible citizen was perceived as the result of birth—not birth into a social class, but birth of a universal human nature. Notice what the U.S. Declaration of Independence says: People are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Early modernity brought with it, then, this vision of the autonomous person: "the human person as a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core which first emerged" at birth and continued to unfold "throughout the individual's existence" (S. Hall, 1996a, p. 597).

Further, the idea that modern society has about the person is itself an institution upon which the social system stands. It is the basis of democracy and the fountainhead of the Enlightenment: "*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from*

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his self-incurred minority. Minority is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. . . . Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding! is the motto of enlightenment" (Kant, 1784/1999, p. 17). Eighteenth century political literature is filled with references to the "enlightened citizen" and is always linked to education. Thus, the institution of the reasoning person goes hand in hand with another institutional change specific to modernity: the shift from education for the elite to education for the masses, from religious to scientific education.

Of course, education for the masses makes perfect sense in a democracy. Power in a modern state rests upon the people. The method through which democratic citizens are to exercise their power is through knowledge, which is why education is a key to the success of democracy—it's also the reason why freedom of the press is guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution; people need information in order to govern. Education is linked to democracy not simply to supply knowledge for voting; education is necessary in democracy because "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 2009/1916, p. 73).

Yet there's something more basic and perhaps more profound implied by this link between the modern person and education: Democracy is based on an idea, a theory of government. One of the first studies of modern democracy was by Alexis de Tocqueville, who came to the United States in 1831. Tocqueville (1835–1840/2002) tells us that many who left their homelands to come to America didn't do it for economic gain or even for personal freedom: Rather, "they tore themselves away from the sweetness of their native country to obey a purely intellectual need . . . they wanted to make *an idea* triumph" (p. 32). In his 2011 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama emphasized this same point:

> We're the home to the world's best colleges and universities, where more students come to study than any place on Earth. What's more, we are the first nation to be *founded for the sake of an idea*—the idea that each of us deserves the chance to shape our own destiny. (n.p., emphasis added)

In a way, then, democracy is conceptual; it is based in and progresses through a vision of what could be. Yet this idea isn't pure speculation; it's founded in a specific way of seeing and understanding the social world. Democracy is based in social theory—the kind of theory found in sociology.

The Birth of Sociology: August Comte

Where shall we begin the story of sociology? People have been thinking about society ever since Plato, but like going back to the proverbial first parents to tell your story, starting that far back wouldn't actually tell the story of sociology. I'm going to begin our story with Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Why Comte? Well, there are a couple of good reasons. First, Comte is the one who is given credit for coming up with the word *sociology,* and he is certainly the first to systematically organize the discipline, since Comte gave us our beginning conceptual framework. Second,

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many if not most professional sociologists would pick Comte as the most logical place to start. So I'm on pretty safe ground starting with him. However, a good beginning point isn't all a story needs; it also needs a plot. A literary plot is the actual organization of the story; it's the pattern of events or the story line that leads the reader along. Without a plot, a literary piece is simply a bunch of disconnected vignettes that have little in common. Although this isn't a novel, I do have a plot in mind for this book. I'm going to tell you a story, and beginning with Comte gives me a foothold.

While Comte is more or less taken for granted as a beginning point, there are some powerful implications for the kind of sociology we do. Jonathan H. Turner (1985), a well-known contemporary theorist, says, "Auguste Comte proclaimed that sociology could take its place among the sciences" (p. 24). To begin with Comte thus implies that the scientific model is to be used to understand human behavior and is the core of sociology. As straightforward as that might sound, there's a problem: Not all sociologists accept that sociology can be a science in the same way as physics or biology. Some sociologists, like many contemporary feminists, argue that the pursuit of timeless laws in society is misguided and that positivism actually works to oppress certain minority groups.

Definition

Positivism is a philosophy of science first articulated by Auguste Comte. There are three foundations of this way of understanding the universe. First is the belief in the infinite potential of the human mind and knowledge. Knowledge, according to Comte, has progressed through three distinct phases: theological, metaphysical, and positivistic. In the positivistic phase, there is virtually no limit to what human beings can discover—the limit of knowledge is set only by the boundaries of the universe. The second premise is that everything within this universe is empirical and operates according to invariant, natural laws that govern behavior in predictable ways, as with the law of gravity. The third foundation of positivism is the belief in science as the best way to improve human existence: "The positive philosophy offers the only solid basis for . . . social reorganization" (Comte, 1830–1842/1975b, p. 83).

The idea that science may not be the proper way to understand human behavior isn't new. There are a variety of critiques, but one that is salient for us comes from Max Weber (Chapter 5), generally conceded to be one of the three most important sociologists that ever lived. Weber drew inspiration for his methodology from Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). Dilthey (1883/1991) characterized Comte's work as "impoverished, superficial, but analytically refined" and said that "Comte and the positivists . . . seemed to me to truncate and mutilate historical reality in order to assimilate it to the concepts and methods of the natural sciences" (p. 49). As I said, our characters are complex.

So why do I begin with Comte? My first reason is that he gives us a clear understanding of scientific sociology, and while there are detractors, much of sociology

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works in this way. Second, Comte gives us insight into the original purpose of sociology. I'll have more to share about this presently. Finally, Comte gives us a point of comparison to talk about and understand the other ways of seeing social life, and we always understand things better, more clearly, if we have something to compare. For example, talking about Weber's approach to understanding society in comparison to science helps to make his position stand out in stark relief. Another example from the book is George Herbert Mead (Chapter 6). Mead is the founder of symbolic interaction, an approach that understands society as an emergent phenomenon. If we first understand that science is focused on discovering invariant laws that allow us to predict human behavior, then Mead's idea of emergent society is all the more powerful and intriguing. So I begin our story with Comte, and I will use his vision and passion for sociology as a starting point to weave a much more complex tapestry throughout the rest of the book.

Comte's Positivism

One of the things I skipped over in most of the textbooks I read as a college student was biographical information. I wanted to get to the actual material because that's what mattered for the test. I'm embarrassed to say that it took me years to realize that a person's social experiences really do matter (I know, pretty slow for a sociologist). People feel, think, and act because of the society in which they live. This basic sociological insight is especially true for the kinds of people we'll meet in this book, powerful minds responding to powerful situations. So I'll start off by sharing with you some of the sociohistorical background of our theorists. Please don't make the same mistake I did. Let these life experiences speak to you and show you why people like Comte thought the way they did. The values and aspirations that guided our theorists came out of their life circumstances. Seeing that actually helps us to use the sociological imagination in our own lives.

Auguste Comte was born in southern France in 1798, and lived until 1857. In some ways, it is difficult for us to imagine the world in which Comte lived. Up until just before Comte's time, Europe had endured a long period of economic and social continuity and rule by religiously supported monarchs, but the eighteenth century changed all that, and not always peacefully. Comte was born during the French Revolution (1789–1799) to a devout royalist and Catholic family. Prior to the revolution, France had experienced severe food shortages, resulting in several food riots, plus rising inflation and a growing national debt.

The French Revolution came out of this caldron of social ills and gave violent birth to the First French Republic (1792–1804). The beginning years of the Republic are known as the Reign of Terror. The leading figure was Maximilien Robespierre, also known as "the incorruptible" because of his self-proclaimed purity of belief, a purity that in practice produced violent intolerance. During this 10-month terror, some 16,000 to 40,000 people lost their lives, and the guillotine became a symbol of the revolution. In 1793, both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette (previous king and queen) were beheaded.

The First French Republic ended when Napoléon Bonaparte declared himself emperor; the First French Empire lasted from 1804 to 1815. During that time, Napoléon carried on an extensive military campaign, which ended with his defeat at

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the Battle of Waterloo. Napoléon's defeat left Europe in disarray. The great European powers of the time—Austria, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and Prussia—met in Vienna to create order out of chaos. This first collective attempt at nation building virtually recast Europe and set the stage for Great Britain to become the dominant world power of the nineteenth century. In France, the monarchy was reinstated and King Louis XVIII reigned until the July Revolution of 1830, when King Louis-Philippe took control. The February Revolution of 1848 forced Louis-Philippe out and Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (Napoléon's nephew) became president of the Second French Republic. In 1851, Louis-Napoléon staged a coup d'état and became Napoléon III, emperor of the Second French Empire (1852–1870).

Comte's time was thus riddled with political upheaval and unrest, and he responded at an early age. When he was 14, Comte broke away from his family's Catholicism and support of the monarchy, declaring himself a republican and an unbeliever. Just 8 years later, Comte (1822/1975a) characterized his society as a "system in its decline. . . . [S]ociety is hurried towards a profound moral and political anarchy" (p. 9). Yet Comte (1848/1957) saw this social disorganization as a necessary step to a greater good; the revolution was "absolutely necessary to rouse and sustain our mental efforts in the search for a new system. . . . The shock was especially necessary for the foundation of [sociology]" (pp. 65–66).

Comte found inspiration for his new science from many sources, but two men stand out specifically: Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–1794) and Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). Condorcet was significant in defining the modern idea of progress. When we think of progress today, most of us see it as technical development. Condorcet saw the more basic issue out of which technology springs: the indefinite perfectibility of the human mind. While you and I may take the ideas that we can learn and grow for granted, it was revolutionary in its beginnings. In Western Europe (and in much of the world as well) people weren't generally seen as capable of independent thought and responsibility. One way to understand this is to think of the Catholic Church, which had been in power in Western Europe for centuries by the time the French Revolution happened. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church mediated salvation and spiritual life with the help of an extensive group of religious specialists, as Weber would call them: the priests, monks, nuns, and various officials who are thought to be closer to God than the average believer. In the same vein, the interpretation of the Bible and education in general was thought to be best left to an elite—the religious elite, of course, and to a lesser extent the aristocracy. What I want you to see here isn't something about Catholicism; rather, I want you to see the general conception of the person prior to the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Seeing the mind as perfectible, believing that regular people could improve their lot in life by growing intellectually, is a relatively new idea. Condorcet was one of the first to declare this concept clearly in its modern form. Condorcet saw this sort of progress linked to education and became one of the architects of the new French education system. He created the base that ultimately led to the secularization of education (previously, education had been the domain of the Catholic Church), mandatory primary education for both boys and girls (he supported full citizenship for women, arguing that gender differences are mostly based on differences in education, not biology), and the standardization of the French language

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(to combat class differences). Condorcet also proposed the merging of the moral and physical sciences in studying human behavior. In Comte's hands, this amalgamation became the discipline of sociology.

Comte was not yet 20 years old when he became the secretary of Henri de Saint-Simon, who became the most influential person in his intellectual life. Saint-Simon was one of the founders of Christian socialism, an intellectual and activist movement that combined the ethics of Christianity with the social justice concerns of socialism, especially the life chances of the poor. At the center of Christian socialism was science and industry. For Saint-Simon, the hope of equality and the end of human misery lay in the theoretical advances of science, practically applied to the production of industry. Saint-Simon believed that the purpose of Christian religion wasn't necessarily eternal salvation, but rather the extension of hope and the relief of suffering to all humankind in this world. Scientists, then, in Saint-Simon's eyes, are the priests of a new social order. From this perspective, science, technology, and capitalism are to be used ethically for the betterment of the human condition. These ideas profoundly influenced Comte, who between 1830 and 1877 published extensively on positivism, the philosophic base of scientific inquiry generally, and sociology in particular.

The Evolution of Knowledge

This new social science came into existence in due course, at a specific point in time, to furnish the theoretical knowledge upon which modern social practices could be based. Modern politics, then, "decides upon the distribution of authority and the combination of administrative institutions best adapted to the spirit of the system already determined by the theoretical labors" (Comte, 1822/1975a, p. 19). These theoretical labors are based upon positivism, a specific way of creating knowledge. The reason I said that this approach came in "due time" is because Comte saw positivism, or the scientific method, as a result of naturally evolving processes at work within both the mind and society.

For Comte, increasing human control over the natural environment marks the historical process of civilization in general. In the beginning stages of human society, we had little control over the sources of basic essentials. Hunter-gatherer groups had to continually move from one place to another so as not to deplete the food sources. As humanity figured out how to plant seeds and then to irrigate fields, we became less dependent upon nature in its pure form—we changed nature to fit our needs. Civilization marches forward, then, as we increase this span of control. This control becomes greater as our mental powers increase. According to Comte, both mind and knowledge have moved through three distinct stages—each phase defined by the relative weights of imagination and observation. Comte saw these stages as necessary, and each as building on the previous.

The first stage is *theological* and "is the necessary point of departure of the human understanding" (Comte, 1830–1842/1975b, pp. 71–72). In this stage, people sought absolute knowledge, the essential nature and ultimate cause of everything. These emphases meant that people wanted to know *why* things happen—their focus was behind the scenes, not on the thing itself. Let's say blight wiped out a farmer's crop during this stage of knowledge. His first and dominant reaction was, "Why? Why me?"

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This sort of question makes the farmer more concerned with the unseen forces behind the blight rather than how the blight actually works. Thus, in this phase, imagination ruled over observation: "the facts observed are explained . . . by means of invented facts" (p. 29). And these "invented facts" were seen as existing before (*a priori*) the observed ones—people made empirical observations fit in with already established beliefs. In addition to the relative weights of imagination and observation, societies, and thus the purpose or outcome of knowledge, vary on a continuum from military to industry, conquest to production. In the theological phase of the mind, "Society makes conquest its one permanent aim" (p. 52). Because knowledge is certain in the theological phase, it is certain that everyone must believe the same.

The second stage of knowledge is *metaphysical* and is a transitory phase. Comte argued that the mind couldn't make the leap straightaway from theology to the positive stage. The metaphysical stage had "a mongrel nature, connecting facts by ideas that are no longer entirely supernatural and have not yet become completely natural" (Comte, 1822/1975a, p. 29). The third phase is *positive* and is ultimately where all knowledge systems will end up in Comte's scheme. Here, observation trumps imagination; truth is judged by empirical observation, and it progresses through skepticism: the empirical assessment of all theories. Scientific theories explain *how some empirical phenomenon works.* Notice the shift in emphasis: from why something happened to how something works. Theory, then, takes the place of spiritual accounts, and as such it is the core of the positive method. Notice also the shift from faith in the unseen to skepticism and empirical examination. The basis of these different ways of knowing are poles apart: For theology, it's imagination and faith; for positivism, it's observation and doubt. Comte likened the change from one to the other to the process of growing up. Children want to know why and want to be comforted; adults want to know how something works so they can take responsibility.

Comte's law of three stages (theological à metaphysical à positive) also holds for the separate disciplines as well. Each branch of science grew to be positivistic according to how complicated the subject and how independent it was from other areas. So, for example, the first discipline to become positivistic was astronomy because, according to Comte (1830–1842/1975b), it is "made up of facts that are general, simple, and independent of other sciences" (p. 76). Then came physics, chemistry, and physiology. The last branch of study to become positivistic was the study of society, which Comte called social physics or sociology. Sociology came last because of the complexity of its subject (human society) and its dependence upon other fields of study, but Comte saw something more here as well. Think of it like an arch made out of stones. Stone arches are built by stacking one block upon another with curved stones at the top. A keystone is placed at the very top, and the tension of the curved stones against the keystone is what holds the entire arch together. The historical progress of science is like that, with each idea building upon another and each field of study based upon the achievements of the previous until the most complicated phenomena could be studied scientifically. Comte claimed that this science, sociology, would also be able to embrace and hold together the rest of the sciences, just like a keystone. Because it developed last and could encompass the other sciences, Comte dubbed sociology the "queen of the sciences." This is, by the way, a position that Émile Durkheim (Chapter 4) also supported.

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Theory

The scientific study of the natural and social worlds is based upon theory. *Theory is a logical explanation of how a given empirical phenomenon works.* Theories are always tentative because they don't claim to explain first or ultimate causes. First and final causes—the why of the universe—are theological and metaphysical knowledge that imply final answers, and final answers imply faith precisely because they can't be observed. A positive approach, on the other hand, doesn't provide final answers and it doesn't demand faith. In fact, "the study of the laws of phenomena must be relative, since it supposes a continuous progress of speculation subject to the gradual improvement of observation, without the precise reality being ever fully disclosed" (Comte, 1830–1842/1975b, pp. 220–221). We are also skeptical about our theories, and there is thus a continual back-and-forth movement (or "testing") between theory and the empirical world. This back-and-forth movement between theory and empirical observation will, according to Comte, eventually lead to a small number of laws that will account for most of the observed human actions. The discovery of these laws allows us to explain, predict, and in some ways control the natural and social worlds.

A law of nature "is a rule that is based upon an observed regularity and provides predictions that go beyond the immediate situations upon which it is based" (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, p. 27). The most famous example of such a law, and one that Comte noted, is Newton's law of gravity. It's pretty clear that Newton wasn't the first to notice that apples always fall to the ground; it's an empirical regularity that's been around for quite some time. Newton went past that observation and explained *how it works.* His explanation had to do with the masses of and distance between two objects. Because his explanation got to the underlying dynamics, we are able to predict with great regularity how gravity will work. Newton's law also has the quality of being universal: It reaches beyond the immediate situation (objects falling on earth) to explain how bodies in space interact. Comte (1875–1877/1975c) fully expected sociology to come up with these kinds of laws for society: "Knowledge of the principal static and dynamics laws of social existence is evidently sufficient for the purpose . . . of rendering our condition far more perfect" (p. 331).

Advantages and Goals of Positivism

Positive knowledge has at least three advantages over previous ways of knowing. First, "the positive system *discovers,* whereas other systems *invent*" (Comte, 1822/1975a, p. 47). Second, because positivism is based on empirical observation, it alone provides a basis for agreement. An old adage says, "There are three things one should never discuss in polite company: religion, politics, and sex." Part of the reason, especially for religion and politics, is that they tend to be explosive subjects. People will argue at length about religion and politics and never resolve anything because it seems like there's no basis for agreement. The only agreement is, "You believe your way and I'll believe mine."

Comte, however, utterly opposes this sentiment. For his entire life, Comte saw political disagreement so fervent that it led to thousands of deaths. His desire was

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to find a way out. (Comte (1822/1975a) formulated sociology for the express purpose of guiding politics and social reorganization: "*scientific men ought in our day to elevate politics to the rank of a science of observation*" (p. 29). Because the workings of society are observable and thus available for all to see, they can provide the basis for agreement. The theories derived from empirical observation also provide the third advantage: relief from the seeming arbitrariness of human existence and misery. With sociological theories to guide politics, "government by measures replaces government by men" (p. 49).

For Comte, the guiding of politics and nations is too important to leave it to ideological beliefs, especially when they are used in the name of God. People were dying in Comte's time—as they are in ours—because politics based on belief will eventually be enforced through military coercion. There is no reasoning with ideology or belief because neither is based in reason—there is, then, no objective basis of agreement. However, if the workings of society and the progress of civilization are empirically available, as Comte believed they are, then a foundation for reason exists.

This foundation provides a hope similar to the one we have in medical science. Medical examples abound, from HIV-AIDS to Ebola, but let's use that of polio. Polio is a painful virus that can be deadly or at the very least paralyzing, and invariably leaves its victims deformed; the great majority of its victims are children. A global outbreak of polio began around 1840. By 1916, New York City reported over 9,000 cases and 2,343 deaths. Homes were quarantined and businesses shut down. The worst year of the epidemic in the United States was 1952, with almost 60,000 new cases reported and 3,145 deaths. Some cities prevented children under 16 from traveling without a health certificate. Fear gripped the nation and the world, as epitomized in this man's account: "The fear of polio was a fear of something you had no defense against, something that hit without logic or reason. Yesterday, it was the man down the block. Today it could be you or your children" ("Whatever Happened to Polio?" n.d.). Thankfully, the *workings* of polio are open to reason. A vaccine became publicly available in 1955. Because scientists were able to figure out the empirical factors of the virus, the last reported case of naturally occurring polio in the United States was in 1979. Comte held that society is subject to the same sorts of empirical factors and theoretical laws. The business of sociology, then, is to discover those factors and laws that can be used to guide society in its quest for improving the human condition. If Comte is right, then the theoretical explanations of how society works will provide the basis for political agreement and a bulwark against the arbitrariness of social life.

Enduring Issues

Hope in the ability of humankind to guide its own destiny is the heart of the Enlightenment. This point of view is rooted in the ideas of a predictable universe and the free reasoning of the human mind. Together, these forged the ideas and modern values of progress. This cluster of ideas, however, was soon questioned, initially by the Counter-Enlightenment movement of the nineteenth century and more recently by such schools of thought as postmodernism and poststructuralism.

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Seeing Society

Almost everybody takes the existence of society for granted. Yet society as we know and understand it today is a relatively new thing. The word *society* came into the English language from French and has a Latin base. The Latin root for society means companion or fellowship, and up until the middle of the eighteenth century, it kept this basic meaning (Williams, 1983, pp. 291–292). Society thus initially referred to a group of friends or associates, like a legal or religious society. Toward the end of the seventeenth and through the middle of the eighteenth century, the idea of society began to be used in more abstract ways to refer to something larger.

Society not only became seen as something bigger than face-to-face social interactions, it also came to be understood as a separate entity, an entity unto itself with its own nature and laws of existence separate from the people who make it up. At the same time, this larger, more abstract entity began to be perceived as something that could exert independent influence over people. As Émile Durkheim (1895/1938) would later write, society is "external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him" (p. 3). Further, society had to be seen as an entity that could be steered or guided. Though I didn't phrase it this way, *the goals of science are to explain, predict, and control.* That's how science defeated polio: Science was able to explain how it works, predict what would happen following a vaccine, and thus control it. In society, the guiding mechanism is the state: "To the extent there is something called 'society,' then this should be seen as a sovereign social entity with a nation-state at its centre that organizes the rights and duties of each citizen" (Urry, 2006, p. 168). This combination of independent existence, law-like factors and processes, and the subsequent ability to control is what gave Comte and sociology its foothold as a science.

Society, then, is an objective, dynamic system that moves along a continuum of equilibrium (social statics) and change (social dynamics). More than anything else, what we need to look at in observing society are its systematic qualities—this is "the only right way" to see society (Comte, 1830–1842/1975b, p. 228). Sociology always sees things in their context. For example, many people today are upset over the loss of "family values," and they want to bring family back to the way they believe it should be. The problem with this observation from a sociological point of view is that the institution of the family doesn't exist in a vacuum. If family has changed, it's because other social institutions have also changed, like the economy and polity (the form or system of government). Once you see this sociologically, you will realize we can't simply go back to family values without changing the entirety of society.

Sociological Methods

In order to understand this new objective entity (society), Comte proposed specific methods for creating sociological knowledge. Fundamentally, our observations as sociologists are always comparative, and according to Comte, there are three places where we can find comparisons: experiments, different cultures, and history. There are two types of experiments. The first is the kind we usually think of, with a scientist in a white coat in a laboratory. Comte calls these direct experiments and says that they are rarely appropriate for sociology because our subject matter is

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too complex. Indirect or natural experiments are suitable for sociology; they occur whenever the ordinary course of life is disrupted. These disruptions often expose underlying structures and processes, social facts that are sometimes difficult to see in normal day-to-day life. A good example is Hurricane Katrina and its impact on New Orleans. As a result of the disaster, the underlying dynamics of race and the problematic relationships among federal, state, and local governmental agencies were revealed and are continuing to be studied by sociologists.

The second place we can make comparisons is across groups, cultures, and societies that currently exist—this is called *synchronic analysis* because it compares different cultures at the same moment in time. We may notice, for instance, that one culture has a high rate of eating disorders among women, whereas another culture doesn't. By comparing these cultures, we can discover the underlying social factors that create these different phenomena. Durkheim (Chapter 4) used this methodology in his famous study of suicide, demonstrating that diverse individual–group relationships create differing suicide rates. Comparisons can also be made historically, comparing states of a single society across time or the evolving path of a social structure—this is called *diachronic analysis* because it compares the same society or culture at a different moment in time, through history. Max Weber (Chapter 5) used this method to trace the historical development of an affinity between two mentalities—Protestantism and capitalism.

Comte also foresaw a potential methodological problem. If you've had a sociological methods course, you might notice something missing from Comte's description of methods. Contemporary textbooks usually divide the field into qualitative and quantitative methods. The primary difference between the two is that quantitative methods use statistical analysis and qualitative generally do not, though there are statistical packages that will quantify qualitative data. While methods books acknowledge both approaches, the majority of texts spend the bulk of their time explaining research approaches that can be analyzed statistically. This is also the case with the main journals in the field: The majority of the articles use statistical analysis. Yet this sort of data analysis is what's missing from Comte's methods—and this wasn't an oversight.

Though trained in mathematics, Comte (1830–1842/1975b) didn't think it was appropriate for sociology. In fact, he thought it was dangerous: "mathematical analysis itself may betray us into substituting signs for ideas, and . . . it conceals inanity of conception under an imposing verbiage" (p. 250). Statistical analysis looks like it gives us hard data similar to the laboratory sciences, but Comte claimed that such analysis is empty—inane—and has the effect of shifting our focus away from theoretical ideas. In turn, this shift threatens to plunge sociology back "into the metaphysical domain by transferring to abstractions what exclusively belongs to observation" (Comte, 1822/1975a, p. 59).

Comte's hesitation about quantification has merit. An emphasis on numbers can move us away from what is fundamentally important—the enlightenment of the mind to see society and to use sociological ideas and theories to guide it. We've already seen that Comte wanted to use sociology to guide the rebuilding of society. He saw the regeneration of education as key, for "a mind suitably trained becomes able by exercise to convert almost all impressions from the events of life into sociological indications" (Comte, 1830–1842/1975b, p. 243). This is what Mills (1959)

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later referred to as "the sociological imagination" (p. 5). Like Mills, Comte saw that this state of mind would involve the totality of one's being, including emotion. In fact, Comte argued that positivism created a new feeling in people, different from those generated by fiction, religion, or human life in general. This "new form of social sentiment . . . is deeper, because in some sort personal; and more reflective, because it results from scientific conviction" (p. 249). That new feeling is the hope that empirically based knowledge can bring.

Practicing Theory—A Summary

We've come a long way in this chapter, and I appreciate your sticking with me. There are few things about theory that I'd like to pull out of the chapter and state more concisely for you. I hope you'll be able to use this section as you go through the rest of the book. It'll help you to read and understand what the theorists say, and it will help you do well on your tests and papers because the concepts will be more succinct in your head.

First, theoretical thinking is a way of seeing and being aware of the world. In his classic text, *Invitation to Sociology,* Peter Berger (1963) has an entire chapter dedicated to "Sociology as a Form of Consciousness." Practicing sociology, he says, "presupposes a certain awareness that human events have different levels of meaning, some of which are hidden from the consciousness of everyday life" (p. 29). This way of seeing is undoubtedly part of the reason you're studying sociology. Sociologists are fascinated with the "what else" of human action and interaction. We're all a bit like Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*—we want to know what's going on behind the curtain, what's really in back of the wizard. Yet the theoretical mind has an additional bent. Practicing theory means not only being curious about what something *is,* but it's also being curious about *the way something works.*

Definition

Theory is a logical explanation of how some empirical phenomenon works in general terms. Theory is built up from concepts, definitions, and relationships. The goals of scientific theory are to explain, predict, and control empirical phenomena.

There are a few things implicit in this idea of how things work that we need to make explicit. That is, the kind of theory that explains how things work is built out of abstract or general concepts, technical definitions, and causal-like relationships. *Concepts* or ideas can be more or less theoretical. So, what makes one concept theoretical and another not? There are at least three qualities that distinguish them: insight, explanatory power, and definition. Theoretical concepts inspire us to see the world with new eyes. I'm sure part of your education in sociology has involved such insights. Many people discover the concepts of race, class, and gender after taking a sociology class. Even more insightful are ideas like collective consciousness, rationalization, anomie, alienation, and commodity fetish. After you understand commodity fetish, you'll never see the shopping frenzy of Black Friday in quite the same way.

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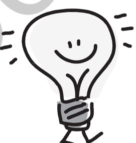
Concepts also determine how much we see and can explain, and those issues are determined by the concept's level of abstraction. Theorists usually call this facet of a concept its *explanatory power.* Generally speaking, the more abstract a concept is, the greater will be its explanatory power. For example, here is a quote from Marx that is tied strongly to a specific situation and is thus not very abstract: "Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way" (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978, p. 475). Marx explains a lot in that statement, but it's bound to a specific time period. However, if we can capture a more general social process in "the discovery of America," then we might have a statement that isn't so historically limited and would qualify, at least in a limited way, as a law-like principle. One way of making the concept expressed in Marx's quote more abstract is to change "discovery of America" to "geographic expansion." We can then make a more powerful theoretical statement: The greater the level of geographic expansion, the greater will be the level of market development. That proposition may sound dry, but it's extremely powerful.

The theoretical value of a concept is also determined by the kind of *definition* we give it. We use abstract concepts all the time, and if pressed, most of us could give some sort of definition for the concepts we use. We can think of these as dictionary definitions: They describe what is generally meant by a concept or idea by most people. But theoretical definitions go beyond dictionary definitions in at least two ways. Let's use religion as an illustration. Merriam-Webster (2002) gives us the following dictionary definition of *religion*: "the personal commitment to and serving of God . . . one of the systems of faith and worship" (n.p.). And that's how most of us think of it and would use it in a sentence, but it has little if any theoretical value.

However, Karl Marx (1932/1978d) defines religion as "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" (p. 54). And Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (p. 44). The first thing you probably noticed is that these two definitions are different; they are different from the dictionary definition and they are different from one another. That's precisely what we mean when we say that theoretical definitions are stipulative: *they stipulate the necessary characteristics to be such a thing in a specific case.* Yet unlike a dictionary definition, they also tend to avoid focusing on what religion *is*. Rather, they are emphasizing what religion *does*, how it *works*, or how it *relates* to other phenomena.


Hint

One way theory is built is through *synthesis*, taking elements from different theories in order to create a more robust explanation. Theory synthesis begins through comparison and contrast. For example, Marx and Durkheim's definitions seem worlds apart. However, they connect on the issue of consciousness, which would be a good place to begin thinking about how Marx's and Durkheim's theories of religion could be brought together.

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The second way theoretical definitions go beyond dictionary ones, indeed, is that they explain how a concept works. Theories are active things, concerned with processes and factors that make other things happen. Look carefully at the definitions that Marx and Durkheim give us, and you'll see what I'm talking about. They both have this kind of statement: "Religion is ________, and religion does ________." For Marx, religion is the "sigh of the oppressed," but it works like a narcotic: It not only dulls the pain of oppression, but it also stupefies the user and renders him or her unable to change society. For Durkheim, religion is a set of practices and beliefs that work to create a collective awareness and social solidarity.

The third issue we need to make explicit about theoretical explanations is that they propose causal-like *relationships* among and between concepts. The last quality of theoretical definitions actually begins to take us down this road. Explicating relationships just takes us one step further: This is what it is, this is what it does, and this is how it does it. While it's just one step, it's the most important one because it holds the heart of theory—it's also the biggest and most difficult step.

Let's use Durkheim's theory of religion for our example here. Making Durkheim's statement a bit more abstract might help us see what we need to do: **Practices** + **beliefs** → **collective consciousness** + **social solidarity** = **religion.** The part we need to explain is found in the arrow. What do practices and beliefs do that create collective consciousness and social solidarity? How does this relationship work? The really short answer is this: *Interactions characterized by high levels of copresence, a common focus of attention, and common emotional mood create high levels of energy that is in turn invested in a set of symbols particular to the group. Because these emotionally infused symbols feel sacred and are held in common by everyone in the collective, they form a group-specific, shared by all, awareness of the world and produce a strong sense of unity, which together form a group's religion.* Right now, understanding the meaning of what I just said isn't as important as seeing what I did. I simply expanded and connected each part of the statement.

I'd like you to do me a favor right now. Please take the italicized statement apart using the statement in bold. I want you to see which part of the bold statement fits with what part of the italicized. The obvious reason I'm asking you to do this is that I want you to see how to build theoretical statements. That's why understanding what I said isn't important right now—we'll wait for our chapter on Durkheim for that. The important thing here is that you understand *the form of theoretical statements.* Theory isn't easy, but it is straightforward. Plus, if you understand and keep in mind the form theory takes, it'll be easier to understand the theory itself. You won't feel as overwhelmed by all the information.

There's also another reason I would like for you to think through the two statements. Theory isn't like most other subjects. Understanding theory requires you to think through the material. With most other subjects, just having a sense that you understand the material is enough—but that usually isn't enough with theory. The reason for this is that theory is found in the relationships. They are the core of every theory; they contain the theory's logic. It is possible to understand every word in the book and still miss the theory. To understand theory, your mind has to travel through that arrow in the bold statement (an arrow that is always there, whether I write it out or not). Theory isn't simply knowing the material; theory is a specific

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way of thinking—and to learn it, you have to practice it, by engaging your mind in the process of thinking through the relationships.

BUILDING YOUR THEORY TOOLBOX

At the conclusion of every chapter, there will be a box like this with review questions, suggestions for further study, ways of applying the theory to your world, and theory-building exercises. I'm keeping this one fairly brief because I'd like you to concentrate on specific issues that will carry through the rest of the book. As I said, I've told you a specific story about modernity—it's all true, but it's not the only story that can be told. This story includes certain ideas that we will come back to many times in our time together. Answering the following questions should help keep these important ideas clear in your mind.

- *Modernity:* Explain the Enlightenment and its place in modernity. How did society change as a result of modernity? What are the specific institutional arrangements in modernity? Explain the modern view of the person.
- *Comte:* Explain Comte's sociological imagination. In other words, what specific historical, social, and intellectual forces impacted Comte's thinking? How did these social factors influence his understanding of sociology and theory?
- *Sociology:* Explain how sociology is the "queen of the sciences." What purpose did Comte see for sociology? How do you see your involvement with sociology differently now that you've read the chapter? What are the advantages and goals of positivism, especially as it relates to sociological theory? What are the appropriate methods for sociology? Why does Comte think that statistics are inappropriate for sociology?
- *Theory:* Write a summation of theory that you can use throughout the book and your class. When your professor gives you a test or paper topic, he or she is expecting to get theoretical ideas in return. Writing theory is different from any other sort of writing, and to do well on your tests and papers, you'll need to know how to write theoretically. That starts by understanding what theory is, what it does, and how it's constructed. In your summation, be sure to include the purpose of theory as well as its building blocks.

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