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INTRODUCTION

Key Concepts

- Theory
- Order
  - Collective/Individual
- Action
  - Rational/Nonrational
- Enlightenment
- Counter-Enlightenment

Alice in Wonderland

“But I’m not a serpent, I tell you!” said Alice. “I’m a—I’m a—”

“Well! What are you?” said the Pigeon. “I can see you’re trying to invent something!”

“I—I’m a little girl,” said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

“A likely story indeed!” said the Pigeon, in a tone of the deepest contempt. “I’ve seen a good many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that! No, no! You’re a serpent; and there’s no use denying it. I suppose you’ll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!”

“I have tasted eggs, certainly,” said Alice, who was a very truthful child; “but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.”

“I don’t believe it,” said the Pigeon; “but if they do, why, then they’re a kind of serpent: that’s all I can say.”

—Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865/1960:54)
In the previous passage, the Pigeon had a theory—Alice is a serpent because she has a long neck and eats eggs. Alice, however, had a different theory—that she was a little girl. Yet, it was not the “facts” that were disputed in the passage. Alice freely admitted that she had a long neck and ate eggs. So why did Alice and the Pigeon come to such different conclusions? Why didn’t the facts “speak for themselves”?

Alice and the Pigeon both interpreted the question (what is Alice?) using the categories, concepts, and assumptions with which each was familiar. It was these unarticulated concepts, assumptions, and categories that led the Pigeon and Alice to have such different conclusions.

Likewise, social life can be perplexing and complex. It is hard enough to know “the facts”—let alone to know why things are as they seem. In this regard, theory is vital to making sense of social life because it holds assorted observations and facts together (as it did for Alice and the Pigeon). Facts make sense only because we interpret them using preexisting categories and assumptions; that is, “theories.” The point is that even so-called facts are based on implicit assumptions and unacknowledged presuppositions. Whether we are consciously aware of them or not, our everyday life is filled with theories as we seek to understand the world around us. The importance of formal sociological theorizing is that it makes assumptions and categories explicit; hence open to examination, scrutiny, and reformulation.

To be sure, some students find sociological theory as befuddling as the conversation between Alice and the Pigeon in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Some students find it difficult to understand and interpret what sociological theorists are saying. Moreover, some students wonder why they have to read works written over a century ago, or why they have to study classical sociological theory at all. After all, classical sociological theory is abstract and dry and has “nothing to do with my life.” So why not just study contemporary stuff, and leave the old, classical theories behind?

In this book, we seek to demonstrate the continuing relevance of classical as well as contemporary sociological theory. By “classical” sociological theory, we mean the era during which sociology first emerged as a discipline and was then institutionalized in universities—the mid-19th to early 20th centuries. We argue that the classical theorists whose work you will read in this book are vital, first, because they helped chart the course of the discipline of sociology from its inception until the present time, and second, because their concepts and theories still resonate with contemporary concerns. These theoretical concerns include the nature of capitalism, the basis of social solidarity or cohesion, the role of authority in social life, the benefits and dangers posed by modern bureaucracies, the dynamics of gender and racial oppression, and the nature of the “self,” to name but a few.

“Contemporary” sociological theory can be periodized roughly from 1935 to the present. However, the dividing line between “classical” and “contemporary” theory is not set in stone, and a few classical thinkers, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, wrote from the late 1800s right up until the 1960s! In identifying core contemporary theorists, we consider the extent to which a writer extends and expands on the theoretical issues at the heart of sociology. To a person, these thinkers all talk back to, revise, and reformulate the ideas of the “founding” theorists of sociology while taking up important issues raised by the social context in which they were/are writing and by the human condition itself.

Yet, the purpose of this book is to provide students not only with both core classical and contemporary sociological readings but also a framework for comprehending them. In this introductory chapter we discuss (1) what sociological theory is, (2) why it is important for students to read the original works of the core figures in sociological theory, (3) who these core theorists are, and (4) how students can develop a more critical and gratifying understanding of some of the most important ideas advanced by these theorists.
WHAT IS SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?

Theory is a system of generalized statements or propositions about phenomena. However, there are two additional features that, together, distinguish scientific theories from other idea systems, such as those found in religion or philosophy. “Scientific” theories

1. explain and predict the phenomena in question and
2. produce testable and thus falsifiable hypotheses.

Universal laws are intended to explain and predict events occurring in the natural or physical world. For instance, Isaac Newton established three laws of motion. The first law, the law of inertia, states that objects in motion will remain in motion, while objects at rest will remain at rest unless acted on by another force. In its explanation and predictions regarding the movement of objects, this law extends beyond the boundaries of time and space. For their part, sociologists seek to develop or refine general statements about some aspect of social life. For example, a long-standing (though not uncontested) sociological theory predicts that as a society becomes more modern, the salience of religion will decline. Similar to Newton’s law of inertia, the secularization theory, as it is called, is not restricted in its scope to any one time period or population. Instead, it is an abstract proposition that can be tested in any society once the key concepts making up the theory, “modern” and “religion,” are defined and observable measures are specified.

Thus, sociological theories share certain characteristics with theories developed in other branches of science. However, there are significant differences between social and other scientific theories (i.e., theories in the social sciences as opposed to the natural sciences) as well. First, sociological theories tend to be more evaluative and critical than theories in the natural sciences. Sociological theories are often rooted in implicit moral assumptions, which contrasts with traditional notions of scientific objectivity. In other words, it is often supposed that the pursuit of scientific knowledge should be free from value judgments or moral assessments; that is, that the first and foremost concern of science is to uncover what is, not what ought to be. Indeed, such objectivity is often cast as a defining feature of science; one that separates it from other forms of knowledge based on tradition, religion, or philosophy. While some sociologists adopt this model of scientific inquiry, others tend to be interested not only in an objective understanding of the workings of society but also in realizing a more just or equitable social order. As you will see, the work of many theorists is shaped in important respects by their own moral sensibilities regarding the condition of modern societies and what the future may bring. Thus, sociological theorizing at times falls short of the “ideal” science practiced more closely (though still imperfectly) by “hard” sciences like physics, biology, or chemistry. The failure to consistently conform to the ideals of either science or philosophy is, for some observers, a primary reason for the discipline’s troublesome identity crisis and “ugly duckling” status within the world of academics. For others, it represents the opportunity to develop a unique understanding of social life.

A second difference between sociological theories and those found in other scientific disciplines stems from the nature of their respective subjects. Societies are always in the process of change, while the changes themselves can be spurred by any number of causes, including internal conflicts, wars with other countries (whether ideological or through direct invasion), scientific or technological advances, or through the expansion of economic markets that in turn spreads foreign cultures and goods. As a result, it is more difficult to fashion universal laws to explain societal dynamics. Moreover, we must also bear in mind that humans, unlike most other animals or naturally occurring elements in the physical world, are motivated to act
by a complex array of social and psychological forces. Our behaviors are not the product of any one principle; instead they can be driven by self-interest, altruism, loyalty, passion, tradition, or habit, to name but a few factors. From these remarks you can see the difficulties inherent in developing universal laws of societal development and individual behavior, this despite our earlier example of the secularization theory and other efforts to forge such laws.

These two aspects of sociological theory (the significance of moral assumptions and the nature of the subject matter) are responsible, in part, for the form in which much sociological theory is written. While some theorists construct formal propositions or laws to explain and predict social events and individual actions, more often theories are developed through storylike narratives. Thus, few of the original readings included in this volume will contain explicitly stated propositions. One of the intellectual challenges you will face in studying the selections is to uncover the general propositions that are embedded in the texts. Regardless of the style in which they are presented, however, the theories (or narratives, if you prefer) you will explore in this text answer the most central social questions while uncovering taken-for-granted truths and encouraging you to examine who you are and where we as a society are headed.

Why Read Original Works?

Some professors agree with students that original works are just too hard to decipher. These professors use secondary textbooks that interpret and simplify the ideas of core theorists. Their argument is that you simply can’t capture students’ attention using original works, and because students must be engaged in order to understand, secondary texts ultimately lead to a better grasp of the covered theories.

However, there is an important problem with reading only secondary interpretations of original works: The secondary and the original text are not the same thing. Secondary texts do not merely translate what the theorist wrote into simpler terms; rather, in order to simplify, they must revise what an author has said.

The problems that can arise from even the most faithfully produced interpretations can be illustrated by the “telephone game.” Recall that childhood game in which you sit in a circle and one person thinks of a message. He or she then whispers the message to the next person, and then that person passes the message on to the next person, until the last person in the circle announces the message aloud. Usually, everyone roars with laughter because the message at the end typically is not the same as the one circulated at the beginning. This is because the message inadvertently gets misinterpreted and changed as it goes around.

In the telephone game the goal is to repeat exactly what has been said to you. Nevertheless, misinterpretations and modifications are commonplace. Consider now a secondary text in which the goal is not to restate exactly what was originally written but to take the original source—that is by nature open to multiple interpretations—and make it “easier” to understand. While this process of simplification perhaps allows students to understand the secondary text, they are at least one step removed from what the original author actually wrote. At the same time, you have no way of knowing what was written in the original works. Moreover, when you start thinking and writing about the material presented in the secondary reading, you are not one—but two—steps removed from the original text. If the object of a course in sociological theory is to grapple with the ideas that preoccupied the core figures of the field—the ideas and analyses that currently shape the direction of sociology—then studying original works must be a cornerstone.

Further complicating the matter is that many of the original works that make up the core of sociological theory were written in a language other than English. Language translation is itself an imperfect exercise.
To this end, we provide excerpts from the original writings of those we consider to be sociology’s core classical and contemporary theorists. We believe that if students are to learn Marx, they must read Marx and not a simplified interpretation of his ideas. They must learn to study for themselves what the leading theorists have said about some of the most fundamental social issues, the relevance of which are timeless.

Nevertheless, in this book we also provide a secondary interpretation of the theorists’ overall frameworks and the selected readings. Our intent is to provide a guide (albeit simplified) for understanding the original works. The secondary interpretation will help you navigate the different writing styles often resulting from the particular historical, contextual, and geographical locations in which the theorists were and are rooted.

Who Are Sociology’s Core Theorists?

Our conviction that students should read the original works of sociology’s core theorists raises an important question: Who are these core theorists? After all, the discipline of sociology has been influenced by dozens of philosophers and social thinkers. Given this fact, the question is, Is it right to hold up a handful of scholars as the core theorists of sociology? Doesn’t this result in the canonization of a handful of (mostly) dead white men, at the expense of a multitude of other social theorists?

In our view, the answer is yes, it is right (or at least not wrong) to cast a select group of intellectuals as the core writers in the discipline; and yes, to an extent, especially in the classical era, this results in the canonization of a few dead, white European males. On the other hand, it is these thinkers who later social theorists (who are not all dead, white, European, and male) primarily have drawn from for inspiration and insight. To better understand our rationale for including some theorists while excluding others, it is important to briefly consider (1) the historical context that set the stage for the development of sociology as a discipline in the late nineteenth century, (2) the central ideas of the core figures of the classical period, and (3) how these ideas and thinkers continue to impact sociological theorists today.

The Enlightenment

Many of the seeds for what would become sociology were first planted with the Enlightenment, a period of remarkable intellectual development that occurred in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. During the Enlightenment, a number of long-standing ideas and beliefs on social life were turned upside down. The development of civil society (open spaces of debate relatively free from government control) and the rapid pace of the modern world enabled a critical mass of literate citizens to think about the economic, political, and cultural conditions that shaped society. Before that, explanations of the conditions of existence were so taken for granted that there was no institutionalized discipline examining them (Lemert 1993; Seidman 1994). Enlightenment intellectuals advocated rule by rational, impersonal laws and the end to arbitrary, despotic governments. They sought to define the rights and responsibilities of free citizens. In so doing, Enlighteners called into question the authority of kings whose rule was justified by divine right.

However, the Enlightenment was not so much a fixed set of ideas, but a new attitude, a new method of thought. One of the most important aspects of this new attitude was an emphasis on reason. Central to this new attitude was questioning and reexamining received ideas and values.

The Enlightenment emphasis on reason was part and parcel of the rise of science. Scientific thought had begun to emerge in the fifteenth century through the efforts of astronomers and...
physicists such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. Enlightenment intellectuals developed an approach to the world based on methodical observations. Rather than seeing the universe as divinely created and hierarchically ordered, Enlighteners insisted that the universe was a mechanical system composed of matter in motion that obeyed natural laws. Moreover, they argued that these laws could be uncovered by means of science and empirical research. In advocating the triumph of reasoned investigation and systematic observation of phenomena over religious faith and common-sense ways of understanding, Enlightenment intellectuals rebuked existing knowledge as fraught with prejudice and mindless tradition (Seidman 1994:20–1). Not surprisingly, such views were dangerous, for they challenged the authority of religious beliefs and those charged with advancing them. Indeed, some Enlighteners were tortured and imprisoned, or their work was burned for being heretical.

The rise of science and empiricism would give birth to sociology in the mid-nineteenth century. The central idea behind the emerging discipline was that society could be the subject of scientific examination in the same manner as biological organisms or the physical properties of material objects. Indeed, the French intellectual Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who coined the term “sociology” in 1839, also used the term “social physics” to refer to this new discipline and his organic conceptualization of society. The term “social physics” reflects the Enlightenment view that the discipline of sociology parallels other natural sciences. Comte argued that like natural scientists, sociologists should rationally and scientifically uncover the laws of the social world.\(^2\) For Enlighteners, the main difference between scientific knowledge and either theological explanation or mere conjecture is that scientific knowledge can be tested. Thus for Comte, the new science of society—sociology—involves (1) the analysis of the central elements and functions of social systems using (2) concrete historical and comparative methods in order to (3) establish testable generalizations about them (Fletcher 1966:14).\(^3\)

However, it was the French theorist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) who arguably was most instrumental in laying the groundwork for the emerging discipline of sociology. Durkheim emphasized that while the primary domain of psychology is to understand processes internal to the individual (for example, personality or instincts), the primary domain of sociology is social facts; that is, conditions and circumstances external to the individual that, nevertheless, determine one’s course of action. As a scientist, Durkheim advocated a systematic and methodical examination of social facts and their impact on individuals.

Yet interestingly, sociology reflects a complex mix of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment ideas (Seidman 1994). In the late eighteenth century, a conservative reaction to the Enlightenment took place. Under the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), the unabashed embrace of rationality, technology, and progress was challenged. Against the emphasis on reason, counter-Enlighteners highlighted the significance of nonrational factors, such as tradition, emotions, ritual, and ceremony. Most importantly, counter-Enlighteners were concerned that the accelerating pace of industrialization and urbanization and growing pervasiveness of bureaucratization were producing profoundly disorganizing effects. In one of his most important works, The Social Contract (1762), Rousseau argued that in order to have a free and equal society, there must be a genuine social contract in which everyone participates in creating laws for the good of society. Thus, rather than being oppressed by impersonal bureaucracy and laws imposed from above,
people would willingly obey the laws because they helped make them. Rousseau’s challenge of the age of reason echoed Pascal’s view that the heart has reasons that reason does not know. When left to themselves, our rational faculties leave us lifeless and cold, uncertain and unsure (see McMahon 2001:35).

In a parallel way, Durkheim was interested in objective or external social facts and the more subjective elements of society, such as feelings of solidarity or commitment to a moral code. Akin to Rousseau, Durkheim felt that it was these subjective elements that ultimately held societies together. Similarly, Karl Marx (1818–1883), who is another of sociology’s core classical figures (though he saw himself as an economist and social critic), fashioned an economic philosophy that was at once rooted in science and humanist prophecy. Marx analyzed not only the economic dynamics of capitalism but also the social and moral problems inherent to the capitalist system. So, too, the third of sociology’s core classical theorists, Max Weber (1864–1920), combined a methodical, scientific approach with a concern about both the material conditions and idea systems of modern societies.

Economic and Political Revolutions

Thus far we have discussed how the discipline of sociology emerged within a specific intellectual environment. But of course, the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment were both the cause and the effect of a whole host of political and social developments, which also affected the newly emerging discipline of sociology. Tremendous economic, political, and religious transformations had been taking place in Western Europe since the sixteenth century. The new discipline of sociology sought to scientifically explain both the causes and the effects of such extraordinary social change.

One of the most important of these changes was the Industrial Revolution, which began in England in the eighteenth century. The Industrial Revolution refers to the application of power-driven machinery to manufacturing. Though industrialization began in remote times and continues today, this process completely transformed Europe in the eighteenth century. It turned Europe from a predominantly agricultural to a predominantly industrial society. It not only radically altered how goods were produced and distributed, it galvanized the system of capitalism as well.

Specifically, with the Industrial Revolution, large numbers of people began to leave farms and agricultural work to become wage earners in factories located in the rapidly growing cities. Indeed, though most of the world’s population was rural before the Industrial Revolution, by the mid-nineteenth century half of the population of England lived in the cities, and by the end of the nineteenth century so did half of the population of Europe. Moreover, while there were scarcely 25 cities in Europe with a population of 100,000 in 1800, there were more than 150 cities this size a century later. At the same time, factories were transformed by a long series of technological changes. Ever more efficient machines were adopted, and tasks were routinized. Thus, for instance, with the introduction of the power loom in the textile industry, an unskilled worker could produce three and a half times as much as the best handloom weaver.

However, this rise in efficiency came at a tremendous human cost. Mechanized production reduced both the number of jobs available and the technical skills needed for work in the factory. A few profited enormously, but most worked long hours for low wages. Accidents were frequent and often quite serious. Workers were harshly punished and/or their wages were docked for even the slightest mistakes. Women and children worked alongside men in noisy, unsafe conditions. Most factories were dirty, poorly ventilated and lit, and dangerous.

As you will read in Chapter 2, Karl Marx was particularly concerned about the economic changes and disorganizing social effects that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Marx not only wrote articles and books on the harsh conditions faced by workers
under capitalism, he also was a political activist who helped organize revolutionary labor movements to provoke broad social change.

As you will read in Chapter 4, Max Weber also explored the profound social transformations taking place in European society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Akin to Marx, Weber was concerned about the social consequences wrought by such profound structural change. However, in contrast to Marx, Weber argued that it was not only modern economic structures (e.g., capitalism) but also organizational structures—mostly importantly bureaucracies—that profoundly affected social relations. Indeed, in one of the most famous metaphors in all of sociology, Weber compares modern society to an “iron cage.” Even more importantly, in contrast to Marx, Weber also examined the particular systems of meaning, or ideas, that both induced and resulted from such profound structural change.

The eighteenth century was a time of not only tremendous economic but also political transformation. One of the most significant political events of that time was the French Revolution, which shook France between 1787 and 1799 and toppled the ancien régime. Inspired in large part by Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, the basic principle of the French Revolution as contained in its primary manifesto, *The Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, was that “all men are born free and equal in rights.” The French revolutionaries called for “liberty, fraternity, and equality.” They sought to substitute reason for tradition and equal rights for privilege. Because the revolutionaries sought to rebuild government from the bottom up, the French Revolution stimulated profound political rethinking about the nature of government from its inception and set the stage for democratic uprisings throughout Europe.

However, the French Revolution sparked a bloody aftermath, making it clear that even democratic revolutions involve tremendous social disruption and that heinous deeds can be done in the name of freedom. During the Reign of Terror led by Maximilien Robespierre, radical democrats rounded up and executed anyone—whether on the left or the right—suspected of opposing the revolution. In the months between September 1793 (when Robespierre took power) and July 1794 (when Robespierre was overthrown), revolutionary zealots arrested about 300,000 people, executed some 17,000, and imprisoned thousands more. It was during this radical period of the Republic that the guillotine, adopted as an efficient and merciful method of execution, became the symbol of the Terror.

The Ins and Outs of Classical and Contemporary “Canons”

Thus far we have argued that the central figures at the heart of classical sociological theory all sought to explain the extraordinary economic, political, and social transformations taking place in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Yet, concerns about the nature of social bonds and how these bonds can be maintained in the face of extant social change existed long before the eighteenth century and in many places, not only Western Europe. Indeed, in the late fourteenth century, Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun (1332–1406), born in Tunis, North Africa, wrote extensively on subjects that have much in common with contemporary sociology (Martindale 1981:134–36; Ritzer 2000a:10). And long before the fourteenth century, Plato (circa 428–circa 347 B.C.), Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), and Thucydides (circa 460–circa 400 B.C.) wrote about the nature of war, the origins of the family and the state, and the relationship between religion and the government—topics that have since

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4R. W. Connell (1997) notes that sociology was born during a decisive period of European colonial expansion. In turn, much of the discipline was devoted to collecting information about the colonizers’ encounters with “primitive Others.” Early sociologists’ views on progress, human evolution, and racial hierarchies, however, were largely marginalized as the process of canon formation began during the 1930s. This had the effect of purging the discourse of imperialism from the history of the discipline. See “Why Is Classical Theory Classical?” *American Journal of Sociology* 102(6):1511–57.
become central to sociology (Seidman 1994:19). Aristotle, for example, emphasized that human beings were naturally political animals (zoon politikon, Martin 1999:157), and he sought to identify the “essence” that made a stone a stone or a society a society (Ashe 1999:89). For that matter, well before Aristotle’s time, Confucius (551–479 B.C.) developed a theory for understanding Chinese society. Akin to Aristotle, Confucius maintained that government is the center of people’s lives and that all other considerations derive from it. According to Confucius, a good government must be concerned with three things: sufficient food, a sufficient army, and the confidence of the people (Jaspers 1957:47).

Yet, these premodern thinkers are better understood as philosophers, not sociologists. Both Aristotle and Confucius were less concerned with explaining social dynamics than with prescribing a perfected, moral social world. As a result, their ideas are guided less by a scientific pursuit of knowledge than by an ideological commitment to a specific set of values. Moreover, in contrast to modern sociologists, premodern thinkers tended to see the universe as a static, hierarchical order in which all beings, human and otherwise, have a more or less fixed and proper place and purpose, and they sought to identify the “natural” moral structure of the universe (Seidman 1994:19).

Our key point here is that while the ideas of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are today at the heart of the classical sociological theoretical canon—and deemed “founding figures” in Part I—this does not mean that they are inherently “better” or more original than those of other intellectuals who wrote before or after them. Rather, it is to say that, for specific historical, social, and cultural as well as intellectual reasons, their works have helped define the discipline of sociology and that sociologists refine, rework, and challenge their ideas in different ways to this day.

For that matter, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim have not always been considered the core theorists in sociology. On the contrary, until 1940, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were not especially adulated by American sociologists (Bierstedt 1981); up to this time, discussions of their work are largely absent from texts. For that matter, Marx was not included in the canon until the 1960s. Meanwhile, even a cursory look at mid-century sociological theory textbooks reveals an array of important “core figures,” including Sumner, Sorokin, Sorel, Pareto, Le Play, Ammon, Veblen, De Tocqueville, Cooley, Spencer, Tönnies, and Martineau. Though an extended discussion of all these theorists is outside the scope of this volume, we provide a brief look at some of these scholars in the “Significant Others” section of the chapters that follow.

In Part II of this book, we focus on several classical writers who for social and/or cultural reasons were underappreciated as sociologists in their day. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), for example, was well known as a writer and radical feminist in her time but not as a sociologist (Degler 1966:vii). It was not until the 1960s that there was a formalized sociological area called “feminist theory.” Gilman sought to explain the basis of gender inequality in modern industrial society. She explored the fundamental questions that would become the heart of feminist social theory some 50 years later, when writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan popularized these same concerns.

Georg Simmel (1868–1963), a German sociologist, wrote works that would later become pivotal in sociology, though his career was consistently stymied both because of the unusual breadth and content of his work and because of his Jewish background. Simmel sought to

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5Durkheim was also Jewish (indeed, he was the son of a rabbi). But anti-Semitism did not significantly impede Durkheim’s career. In fact, it was Durkheim’s eloquent article “Individualism and Intellectuals” (1898) on the Dreyfus affair (a political scandal that emerged after a Jewish staff officer named Captain Alfred Dreyfus was erroneously court-martialed for selling secrets to the German embassy in Paris) that shot him to prominence and eventually brought Durkheim his first academic appointment in Paris. In sum, German anti-Semitism was much more harmful to Simmel than French anti-Semitism was to Durkheim.
uncover the basic forms of social interaction, such as “exchange,” “conflict,” and “domination,” that take place between individuals. Above all, Simmel underscored the contradictions of modern life; for instance, he emphasized how individuals strive to conform to social groups and, at the same time, to distinguish themselves from others. Simmel’s provocative work is gaining more and more relevance in today’s world where contradictions and ironies abound.

While anti-Semitism prevented Simmel from receiving his full due, and sexism impeded Gilman (as well as other women scholars) from achieving hers, the forces of racism in the United States forestalled the sociological career of the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963). Not surprisingly, it was this very racism that would become Du Bois’s most pressing scholarly concern. Du Bois sought to develop a sociological theory about the interpenetration of race and class in America at a time when most sociologists ignored or glossed over the issue of racism. Though underappreciated in his day, Du Bois’s insights are at the heart of contemporary sociological theories of race relations.

We conclude our discussion of classical sociology with the work of social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Mead laid the foundation of symbolic interactionism, which, as you will see in Part III, has been one of the major perspectives in sociological theory since the middle of the twentieth century. Mead challenged prevailing psychological theories about the mind by highlighting the social basis of thinking and communication. Mead’s provocative work on the emergent, symbolic dimensions of human interaction continue to shape virtually all social psychological and symbolic interactionist work today.

This brings us to contemporary sociological theory, which, as indicated previously, can be periodized roughly from 1935 to the present. If ascertaining who sociology’s core classical theorists are was difficult, determining who sociology’s core contemporary theorists are is even thornier. There are myriad possibilities, and contemporary sociologists disagree not only as to who is a core theorist and who is not but even as to the major genres or categories of contemporary theory. For that matter, even defining what theory “is” or should be is a far-from-settled issue. Tied to this state of affairs is the increasing fragmentation of sociological theory over the past 25 years. During this period, sociology has become both increasingly specialized (breaking into such subspecialties as sociology of emotions and world system theory) and increasingly broad as sociologists have built new bridges between sociology and other academic fields (e.g., anthropology, psychology, biology, political science, and literary studies), further contributing to the diversity of the discipline.

That said, in this book we take a broad, historical perspective, prioritizing individuals who have significantly influenced others—and the discipline—from the mid-twentieth century until today. In the end, however, determining the “ins and outs” of contemporary theory is a contentious matter, and as such, the writers whose work we feature in this volume are by no means unanimously “core.” As per the classical theorists we discussed earlier, we address this issue within the space constraints of this book by providing a briefer look at a number of important theorists in the “Significant Others” section of the chapters that follow.

In Part III, we focus on several major perspectives that have emerged in contemporary sociological theory. We begin with the tradition of structural functionalism and the work of Talcott Parsons and one of his most prolific students, Robert Merton. From the 1930s through the 1970s, functionalism was the dominant theoretical approach in American sociology. A major emphasis of this approach lies in analyzing the societal forces that sustain or disrupt the stability of existing conditions. Functionalists introduced central concepts, such as “role,” “norm,” and “social system,” into the discipline of sociology. They also coined several concepts (such as “role model” and “self-fulfilling prophecy”) that are in widespread colloquial and academic use today.

Chapter 10 examines the Frankfurt School of critical theory, particularly the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. Due in large measure to the
dominance of the functionalist paradigm, the ideas expressed within this perspective would not find wide dissemination in the United States until the 1960s when the sweeping social and cultural changes occurring in the broader society demanded a radically different theoretical approach to their explanation. Rather than emphasizing societal cohesion or consensus (as functionalist typically did), critical theorists underscore the divisive aspects of the social order. Drawing particularly from the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber, the theorists presented in this section seek to expose the oppressive and alienating conditions that are said to characterize modern societies.

As you will see, one of the most important characteristics of both functionalism and critical theory is their collectivist or “macro” approach to social order. (This point will be further explained.) However, a variety of more individualistic perspectives focusing more on the “micro” dimension of the social order were developing alongside these two theoretical camps. In Chapter 11 we examine one of the most important of these perspectives: exchange theory. Instead of looking to social systems or institutions for explanations of social life, exchange theorists emphasize individual behavior. Moreover, they consider individuals to be strategic actors whose behavior is guided by exchanges of benefits and costs. Based on rational calculations, individuals use the resources they have at their disposal in an effort to optimize their rewards. We focus especially on the work of two renowned exchange theorists: George Homans, who draws principally from behavioral psychology and neoclassical economics, and Peter Blau, who, while sympathetic to economics, evinces a greater indebtedness to the German sociologist Georg Simmel (see Chapter 6).

In Chapter 12, dramaturgical theory and symbolic interactionism, we continue our discussion of analyses of everyday life by examining the work of Erving Goffman and Arlie Russell Hochschild. As the leading proponent of dramaturgy, Erving Goffman occupies a unique place in the pantheon of contemporary theorists. While rooted in part in a symbolic interactionist approach, Goffman also drew from the work of Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. In doing so, he developed a fascinating account of the commonplace rituals that pervade daily interaction and their significance in constructing and presenting an individual’s self. Arlie Hochschild’s work bears the imprint of Goffman but incorporates a focus on a crucial, though often neglected, aspect of social life: emotions. Additionally, she brings within her purview an examination of gender and family dynamics in contemporary capitalist society.

In Chapter 13, we discuss phenomenology: a perspective that, akin to exchange theory and symbolic interactionism, focuses not on political, economic, and social institutions at the collectivist level but on the everyday world of the individual. However, in contrast to exchange theorists (who emphasize the strategic calculation of rewards and costs in everyday life), phenomenologists such as Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasize the subjective categories behind and within which everyday life revolves. They are interested in how people actively produce and sustain meaning.

Hochschild’s integration of questions of gender into symbolic interactionism and dramaturgical theory brings us to an obvious but all-too-often overlooked point: Sociological theory has traditionally been written by men from the perspective of men. In Chapter 14, we focus on a tradition that takes seriously both the dearth of female voices in sociological theorizing and the distinct social situation of women in society: feminist theory. As you will see, feminist theory is very diverse. Feminist theorists all address a specific topic—gender equality (or the lack thereof)—but they examine this issue from a number of theoretical perspectives. Indeed, in this chapter you will read selections from the works of the institutional ethnographer Dorothy Smith, who extends and integrates the seemingly disparate traditions of phenomenology and Marxism; neo-Marxist feminist Patricia Hill-Collins, whose Black feminist thought speaks to the particular situation of African American women; and postmodernist Judith Butler, who rejects the very idea that “women” can be understood as a concrete category at all and, instead, construes gender as unstable “fictions” (1990, p. 145).
One of the greatest challenges to theory in the twentieth century has come from poststructuralism/postmodernism. The theorists whose work you will read in Chapter 15, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, both critically engage the meaning of modernity by emphasizing how all knowledge, including science, is a representation of reality—not “reality” itself. Baudrillard goes the furthest here, contending that in contemporary society “reality” has completely given way to a simulation of reality, or hyperreality, as simulated experience has replaced the “real.”

In Chapter 16, we present the work of three leading theorists: Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Giddens. Each of these theorists has been involved in a similar project; namely, developing a multidimensional approach to social life that integrates elements from distinct theoretical orientations. In articulating their perspectives, each has emphasized a different theme. Bourdieu develops his project through an emphasis on the reproduction of class relations; Habermas’s approach addresses the prospects for democracy in the modern world. For his part, Giddens explores the effects of modernity on trust, risk, and the self.

We conclude this book with an examination of various theories pertaining to contemporary global society. As you will see, although the works of Immanuel Wallerstein and Edward Said are quite distinct, these two theorists focus not on the dynamics of interpersonal interaction (à la symbolic interactionism; see Chapter 12) or the forces that give form to a single society per se (à la functionalism; see Chapter 9) but, rather, on how such aspects of social life are themselves embedded in a global context and how what happens in any given country (or geographical zone) is a function of its interconnections with other geographical regions. Indeed, these theorists both underscore that, given the increasingly unrestricted flow of economic capital and cultural images across countries, the nation-state—a self-governing territory demarcated by recognized spatial boundaries—can no longer serve as the dominant unit of analysis today.

How can we navigate sociological theory?

Thus far we have (1) explained the importance of sociological theory, (2) argued that students should read original theoretical works, and (3) discussed the social theorists who we consider to be at the heart of classical and contemporary sociological theory. Now we come to the fourth question: How can we best navigate the wide range of ideas that these theorists bring to the fore? To this end, in this section we explain the analytical frame or “map” that we use in this book to explore and compare and contrast the work of each theorist.

The Questions of “Order” and “Action”

Our analytical frame or map revolves around two central questions that social theorists and philosophers have grappled with since well before the establishment of sociology as an institutionalized discipline: the questions of order and action (Alexander 1987). Indeed, these two questions have been a cornerstone in social thought at least since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers. The first question, that of order, asks what accounts for the patterns and/or predictability of behavior that lead us to experience social life as routine. Or, expressed somewhat differently, how do we explain the fact that social life is not random, chaotic, or disconnected but instead demonstrates the existence of an ordered social
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universe? The second question, that of action, considers the factors that motivate individuals or groups to act. The question of action, then, turns our attention to the forces that are held responsible for steering individual or group behavior in a particular direction.

Similar to how the north-south, east-west coordinates allow you to orient yourself to the details on a street map, our analytical map is anchored by four “coordinates” that assist in navigating the details of the theories presented in this volume. In this case, the coordinates situate the answers to the two questions. Thus, to the question of order, one answer is that the patterns of social life are the product of structural arrangements or historical conditions that confront individuals or groups. As such, preexisting social arrangements produce the apparent orderliness of social life as individuals and groups are pursuing trajectories that, in a sense, are not of their own making. Society is thus pictured as an overarching system that works down on individuals and groups to determine the shape of the social order. Society is understood as a reality “sui generis” that operates according to its own logic distinct from the will of individuals. This orientation has assumed many different names—macro, holistic, objectivist, structuralist, and the label we use here, collectivist.

By contrast, the other answer to the question of order is that social order is a product of ongoing interactions between individuals and groups. Here, it is individuals and groups creating, re-creating, or altering the social order that works up to produce society. This position grants more autonomy to actors, as they are seen as relatively free to reproduce the patterns and routines of social life (i.e., the social order) or transform them. Over time, this orientation has earned several names as well—micro, elementarism, subjectivist, and the term we adopt, individualist.

Figure 1.1  Basic Theoretical Continuum as to the Nature of Social Order

Turning to the question of action, we again find two answers labeled here as nonrational and rational. Specifically, action is primarily nonrational when it is guided by values, morals, norms, traditions, the quest for meaning, unconscious desires, and/or emotional states. While the nonrationalist orientation is relatively broad in capturing a number of motivating forces, the rationalist orientation is far less encompassing. It contends that individual and group actions are motivated primarily by the attempt to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. Here, individuals and groups are viewed as essentially calculating and strategic as they seek to achieve the “selfish” goal of improving their position. In short, interests—not values—motivate action.

Intersecting the two questions and their answers, we can create a four-celled map on which we are able to plot the basic theoretical orientation of both the core classical theorists (see Figure 1.3) and the major contemporary perspectives (see Figure 1.4) discussed in this

7The terms rational and nonrational are problematic in that they have a commonsensical usage that is at odds with how theorists use these terms. By “rational” we do not mean “good and smart,” and by “nonrational” we do not mean irrational, nonsensical, or stupid (Alexander 1987, p. 11). Despite these problems, however, we continue to use the terms rational and nonrational.
Figure 1.2 Basic Theoretical Continuum as to the Nature of Social Action

NONRATIONAL

action motivated by ideals, values, morals, tradition, habits, or emotional states

RATIONAL

action motivated by a strategic or calculated attempt to maximize rewards/benefits while minimizing costs

Figure 1.3 Core Classical Theorists’ Basic Orientation*

NONRATIONAL

Mead
Simmel
Du Bois**
Weber
Gilman
Marx

INDIVIDUAL

COLLECTIVE

RATIONAL

*This diagram reflects the basic theoretical orientation of each thinker. However, every theorist in this volume is far more nuanced and multidimensional than this simple figure lets on. The point is not to “fix” each theorist in a predetermined box but, rather, to provide a means for illuminating and discussing each theorist’s orientation relative to one another and within their various works.

**Our placement of Du Bois on the nonrational side of the continuum reflects the excerpts in this volume that were chosen because of their theoretical significance. In our view, it is his understanding of racial consciousness that constitutes his single most important theoretical contribution. However, he continually underscored the intertwined, structural underpinnings of race and class that, in the latter part of his life, led him to adopt a predominantly rationalist, Marxist-inspired orientation. In our view, however, Du Bois’s later work has more empirical than theoretical significance.
book. The four cells are identified as individual-nonrational, individual-rational, collective-nonrational, and collective-rational. Yet, we cannot overemphasize that these four coordinates are “ideal types”; theorists and theories are never “pure.” Implicitly and/or explicitly, theorists inevitably incorporate more than one orientation in their work. This is even truer today than in the past, as today’s theorists explicitly attempt to bridge the theoretical gaps and dilemmas left by earlier thinkers. Thus, these coordinates (or cells in the table) are best understood as endpoints on a continuum on which theories typically occupy a position somewhere between the extremes. This multidimensionality and ambiguity is reflected in our maps by the lack of fixed points.

In addition, it is important to note that this map is something you apply to the theories under consideration. Though all of theorists address the questions of order and action, they generally do not use these terms in their writing. For that matter, their approaches to order and action tend to be implicit, rather than explicit, in their work. Thus, at times, you will have to read between the lines to determine a theorist’s position on these fundamental questions. While this may pose some challenges, it also expands the opportunities for learning.

Consequently, not everyone views each theorist in exactly the same light. Moreover, even within one major work, a theorist may draw from both ends of the continuum. Nevertheless, these maps enable you to (1) recognize the general tendencies that exist within each theorist’s body of work and (2) compare and contrast (and argue about) thinkers’ general theoretical orientations.
Put another way, when navigating the forest of theory, individual theorists are like trees. Our analytic map is a tool or device for locating the trees within the forest so that you can enter and leave having developed a better sense of direction or, in this case, having learned far more than might have otherwise been the case. By enabling you to compare theorists’ positions on two crucial issues, their work is less likely to be seen as a collection of separate, unrelated ideas. Bear in mind, however, that the map is only a tool. Its simplicity does not capture the complexities of the theories or of social life itself.

In sum, it is essential to remember that this four-cell table is an analytical device that helps us understand and compare and contrast theorists better, but it does not mirror or reflect reality. The social world is never a function of either “individuals” or “social structures” but a complex combination of both; so, too, motivation is never completely rational or completely nonrational. To demonstrate this point in addition to how our analytical map on “action” and “order” works in general, we turn to a very simple example.

Consider the question: Why do people stop at red traffic lights? First, in terms of action, the answer to this question resides on a continuum with rational and nonrational orientations serving as the endpoints. On one hand, you might say that people stop at red traffic lights because it’s in their best interest to avoid getting a ticket or into an accident. This answer reflects a rationalist response; the action (stopping at a red light) is rooted in minimizing costs. A nonrationalist answer to this question is that people stop at red traffic lights because they believe that it is good and right to follow the law. Here the individual takes her bearings from internalized morals or values. Interestingly, if this moral or normative imperative is the only motivation for action, the individual will stop at the traffic light even if there is no police car or oncoming cars in sight. External circumstances, such as whether or not they will get hit or caught if they go through the red light, are irrelevant. By contrast, if one’s only motivation for action is rationalist, and there are absolutely no visible dangers (i.e., no other cars in sight and hence no possibility of getting a ticket or getting into an accident), the driver will not stop at the red light. Rather, on the basis of a calculated appraisal of the relevant conditions, she will go.

Another nonrationalist answer to the question “Why do people stop at red traffic lights?” involves “habits” (see Table 1.1). By definition, habits are relatively unconscious; that is, we don’t think about them. They come “automatically,” not from strategic calculations of interests or a concern for consequences; that is why they are typically considered nonrational. Interestingly, habits may or may not have their roots in morality. Some habits are “folkways,” or routinized ways people do things in a particular society (paying your bills by mail rather than in person; driving on the right side of the road), while other habits are attached to sacred values (putting your hand over your heart when you salute the flag).

Getting back to our example, let’s say you are driving your car on a deserted road at 2:00 in the morning, and you automatically stop at a red traffic light out of habit. Your friend riding with you might say, “Why are you stopping? There’s not a car in sight.” If your action were motivated simply from habit and not a moral imperative to follow the law, you might say, “Hey, you’re right!” and run through the red light.

Of course, actions often have—indeed, they usually have—both rational and nonrational dimensions. For instance, in this last example, you may have interpreted your friend’s question, “Why are you stopping? There’s not a car in sight” to mean, “Don’t be a goody-goody—let’s go!” In other words, you may have succumbed to peer pressure even though you knew it was wrong. If such was the case, you may have wittingly or unwittingly felt that your ego, or “sense of self,” was on the line. Thus, it was not so much that rational trumped nonrational motivation; rather, you acted out of a complex combination of your assessment of the traffic conditions, pressure from your friend to do the “cool” thing, and your desire to be the particular type of person you want to be.

Indeed, a basic premise of this book is that because social life is extremely complex, a complete social theory must account for multiple sources of action and levels of social
order. Theorists must be able to account for the wide variety of components (individual predispositions, personality and emotions, social and symbolic structures) constitutive of this world. Thus, for instance, our rationalist response to the question of why people stop at red traffic lights—that people stop simply because they don’t want to get a ticket or get into an accident—is, in fact, incomplete. It is undercut by a series of unacknowledged nonrational motivations. There is a whole host of information that undergirds the very ability of an individual to make this choice. For example, before one can even begin to make the decision as to whether to stop for the red light or not, one must know that normally (and legally) “red” means “stop” and “green” means “go.” That we know and take for granted that “red” means “stop” and “green” means “go” and then consciously think about and decide to override that cultural knowledge (and norm) indicates that even at our most rationalist moments we are still using the tools of a largely taken-for-granted, symbolic or nonrational realm (see Table 1.1).

Now let’s turn to the issue of order.

If we say that people stop at red lights because they don’t want to get a ticket, this can reflect a collectivist approach to order if we are emphasizing that there is a coercive state apparatus (e.g., the law, police) that hems in behavior. If such is the case, we are emphasizing that external social structures precede and shape individual choice. This collectivist approach to order (and rationalist approach to action) is illustrated in Table 1.1.

If we say that people stop because they believe it is good and right to follow the law, we would be taking a collectivist approach to order as well. Here we assume that individuals are socialized to obey the law. We emphasize that socially imposed collective morals and norms are internalized by individuals and reproduced in their everyday behavior. Similarly, if we emphasize that it is only because of the preexisting symbolic code in which “red” means “stop” and “green” means “go” that individuals can then decide what to do, we would be taking a collectivist approach. These versions of order and action are illustrated in Table 1.1.

On the other hand, that people stop at red traffic lights because they don’t want to get into an accident or get a ticket also might reflect an individualist approach to order, if the assumption is that the individual determines his action using his own free will, and from this...
the traffic system is born. At the same time, another important individualist, albeit nonrationalist, answer to this question emphasizes the role of emotions. For instance, one might fear getting a ticket or into an accident, and to the extent that the fear comes from within the individual, rather than from a set of laws or socialization into a preexisting symbolic code, we can say that this represents an individualist explanation for the patterning of social life.

Sociological theorists hold a variety of views on the action/order continua even within their own work. Overall, however, each theorist can be said to have a basic or general theoretical orientation. For instance, in terms of the classical theorists discussed earlier, Marx was most interested in the collectivist and rationalist conditions behind and within order and action, while Durkheim, especially in his later work, was most interested in the collectivist and nonrationalist realms. Thus, juxtaposing Figure 1.3 and Table 1.1, you can see that if we were to resurrect Marx and Durkheim from their graves and ask them the hypothetical question “Why do people stop at red traffic lights?” it would be more likely that Marx would emphasize the rationalist motivation behind this act (they seek to avoid getting a ticket), while Durkheim would emphasize the nonrational motivation (they consider it the “right” thing to do)—though both would emphasize that these seemingly individualist acts are actually rooted in collectivist social and cultural structures (that it is the law with its coercive and moral force that undergirds individual behavior). Meanwhile, at the more individualist end of the continuum, Mead (see Chapter 8) would probably emphasize the immediate ideational process in which individuals interpret the meanings for and consequences of each possible action. (Naturally, each of these theorists’ work is far more complex and multidimensional than this simple example lets on.)

Of course, the purpose of this book is not to examine the work of sociological theorists in order to figure out how they might answer a hypothetical question about traffic lights. Rather, the purpose of this book is to examine the central issues core classical and contemporary theorists themselves raise and analyze the particular theoretical stance they take as they explore these concerns. These tasks are particularly challenging because the contemporary theorists and perspectives you will encounter in this book tend to be even more theoretically complex than sociology’s classical founding figures. This is because contemporary theorists are not only drawing from and extending the classical theorists’ ideas, they are also seeking to better them. For instance, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens, whose works are discussed in Chapter 16, have each set out to develop a theoretical model that explicitly synthesizes and bridges nonrationalist and rationalist and individualist and collectivist concerns and ideas. However, all of the contemporary theorists whose works you will read in this book are well aware of, and seek to correct in some way, the theoretical dilemmas posed by sociology’s founding figures. Some thinkers, for instance those aligned with exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology (see Chapters 11, 12 and 13), look to address more fully the individualist realm that Marx, Weber, and Durkheim underemphasized (see Figure 1.5). Other theorists, such as the structural functionalist Talcott Parsons (see Chapter 9) and critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (see Chapter 10), meld the collectivist focus of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber with the ideas of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and thus incorporate an individualist (and nonrational) component to their respective arguments.

Notwithstanding their attempts to construct multidimensional theories, contemporary theorists and the perspectives they are aligned with generally evince a “basic” theoretical orientation, and these orientations are illustrated in Figures 1.4 and 1.5. For instance, as you will see in Chapter 13, phenomenology focuses, above all, on how individuals apprehend social life on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions. Instead of positing an overarching, objective social order that establishes behavioral codes according to which individuals are more or less compelled to act (reflecting a collectivist approach to order), they see behavior as patterned or predictable only to the extent that individuals rely on commonplace schemes
Figure 1.5  Basic Orientation of Major Classical Theorists and Contemporary Perspectives in Sociological Theory

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of understanding to navigate their everyday life. This reflects an emphasis on the individualist/nonrationalist realm. Here, social life is pictured as an intricate panoply of interaction as individuals go about the process of making sense of the situations they face. As we discuss in Chapter 11, exchange theory, on the other hand, posits that individual conduct is not motivated by attempts to construct meaning or by an intersubjectivity that enables actors to coordinate their behavior. Instead, this perspective argues that individuals are motivated by conscious attempts to satisfy their interests, which reflects an individualist/rationalist theoretical orientation. Moreover, society itself is seen as an accumulation of individual efforts to maximize rewards that have the effect of producing and sustaining institutional structures. Thus, while an exchange theorist would recognize that individuals act within existing institutions, his focus would be how individuals maneuver within a given institution in order to maximize their self-interests.

Unlike the individualist perspectives just outlined, collectivist approaches argue that individual and group conduct is largely shaped by external forces. For instance, as you will see in Chapter 9, functionalism posits that societies are self-contained systems that possess their own needs necessary to their survival. It is the existence of such societal needs that in large measure accounts for patterns of individual and group of behavior. For example, because all societies must ensure some measure of peaceful coexistence between its members, a system of shared values and morals must be developed in order to establish the basis for consensual relations. As depicted in Figure 1.4, these assumptions reflect an emphasis on the collective/nonrational realm. For its part, world-systems theory, discussed in Chapter 17, explores the historical dynamics that have created the modern capitalist economy, an economy whose reach spans the globe. Far from studying the routines of everyday interaction, or the consciousness of individuals, world-systems theory explores how distinct regions of the world are tied to one another by relations of domination and subordination that in turn affect economic and social dynamics within a given country. These regions have developed according to a strategic, profit-driven logic that has produced the world’s winners and losers, its colonizers and colonized. This argument reflects a collectivist/rationalist orientation.
Yet, it cannot be overemphasized that the point is not to “fix” each theorist or tradition in a particular box. All of the theorists and traditions presented in this book are far more complex than these basic figures demonstrate. Moreover, there is an important exception to our assertion that one of the main goals of contemporary theory is to achieve theoretical synthesis and/or multidimensionality: poststructuralism and postmodernism. As you will see, poststructural and postmodern theorists, such as Judith Butler (Chapter 14) and Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard (Chapter 15), dismiss—rather than advance—overarching theoretical frameworks as “essentializing” and misguided. Throughout Part IV, but especially in Chapter 15, we will explore the ideas of these provocative thinkers who challenge some of sociology’s central tenets and concerns.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the difference between “primary” and “secondary” theoretical sources. What are the advantages and disadvantages of reading each type of work?

2. Using Table 1.1 as a reference, devise your own question and then give hypothetical answers that reflect the four basic theoretical orientations: individual/rational, individual/nonrational, collective/rational, and collective/nonrational. For instance, why do 16-year-olds stay in (or drop out of) school? Why might a man or woman stay in a situation of domestic violence? What are possible explanations for gender inequality? Why are you reading this book?

3. Numerous works of fiction speak to the social conditions that early sociologists were examining. For instance, Charles Dickens’s Hard Times portrays the hardships of the Industrial Revolution, while Victor Hugo’s Les Miserables addresses the political and social dynamics of the French Revolution. Read either of these works (or watch the play), and discuss the tremendous social changes they highlight.

4. One’s answers to the questions of order and action have methodological as well as theoretical implications. Theories, after all, should be testable through the use of empirical data. Particularly with regard to the question of order, the perspective one adopts will have important bearing on what counts as evidence and how to collect it. Consider both an individualist and collectivist perspective: How might you design a research project studying the causes and effects of job outsourcing or studying the causes and effects of affirmative action? How about a study of the causes and effects of the raising costs of college tuition or the causes and effects of drug and alcohol abuse? What types of questions or data would be most relevant for each approach? How would you collect the answers to these questions? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with each approach?
Part I

FOUNDATIONS OF CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY