The inspiration to develop ideas into social theories can come from a wide variety of sources. One of the authors of this chapter, Steven Lukes, recounts how he was motivated to think about two classical questions in social theory: morality and power.

It was during a dinner conversation in Buenos Aires at the height of Argentina’s “Dirty War” in the mid-1970s that I became motivated to think about morality and power. During this time thousands of people—among them trade unionists, journalists, and students—“disappeared” by orders of the Argentinean military government; that is, they were tortured and killed, often in clandestine detention centers, or in some cases simply dropped from planes into the sea. When I voiced concern over what I then knew of these atrocities, my dinner companion—who was the local head of one of the world’s leading news agencies—astonished me with his response. I should understand, he explained to me that in Argentina, a lower value was set on life than in Britain, from which I came.

My astonishment led me to a few questions with implications for approaching issues sociologically. In my simple disbelief of his factual claim, I first wondered, on what evidence was it based? My second question was what motivated him to make this sweeping claim? As a journalist whose task was to give an unbiased account of the local scene to the world, he seemed to be drawing on personal impressions and stereotyping prejudices. Yet he also seemed to want to offer an impartial and comparative perspective to an overheated and ill-informed visitor.
Understanding the circumstances or conditions under which societies change is one of the three common themes that all of the major sociological theories have sought to address in one way or another.
While this is not, I hasten to say, a story about good journalism, it does raise the question of what corrective procedures sociology, as distinct from those of journalism, can bring to overcome bias and approach objectivity in marshaling evidence. That question is general, but it is especially intriguing where values are at issue, for we know that what people value is shaped by societal contexts and can vary from one context to another or one culture to another. While Argentines surely have many distinctive attitudes and customs, it was hard to imagine that caring less about their own lives was one of these. What can sociology contribute to assessing which values are variable and which are constant across contexts and cultures? We know, of course, that suicide bombers do sacrifice their lives, but to notice that is to raise the larger question of the power of ideology and the sociological task of identifying the conditions under which it can motivate individuals to such extreme behavior.

Moreover, it was striking that my journalist companion avoided all mention of power relations—understandably enough, for we were in a restaurant and could be overheard. The context in Argentina at that time was, of course, extreme: a context of terror and coercion, of censorship and self-censorship, where journalists and others bit their tongues and went along with the status quo. How do we ever know what part those in power play in shaping our values, beliefs, and preferences? Sometimes what is extreme can shed light on the normal and the routine. In Argentina, the impact of those in power on ordinary lives was all too visible, if unmentioned over dinner. But how is the sociologist to investigate the less overt and more hidden operations of power in normal times and places?

The memory of this striking conversation stayed with me and played an important role in turning my attention to social theories of morality and theories about the relationship between morality and power.

Hebe de Bonafini, the head of Argentina’s Mothers of Plaza de Mayo group, whose children disappeared during the dirty war of 1970s, leads one of the marches in Buenos Aires’s Plaza de Mayo in December 1979.
In this chapter we explore social theory by examining four central questions:

1. **What is social theory?** Social theories enable us to see the social world in different ways. In this section we identify three common themes that all of the major sociological theories have sought to address.

2. **How did the early social theorists make sense of the world?** The foundations of modern sociology, and social theory as we know it today, can be traced to the writings of a handful of key thinkers working in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. In this section we introduce you to Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and W. E. B. Du Bois.

3. **What innovations in social theory emerged in the mid-twentieth century?** After World War II, the interests of social theorists began to shift in new and unexpected directions, and leadership in the development of social theory and sociology as a whole passed from being located primarily in Europe to America. Here we introduce you to the new directions in social theory that were embodied by functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

4. **How has a new generation of social theory evolved?** Finally, we provide a brief sampling of some important new theories that have evolved since the 1960s. How have contemporary theorists built upon or transformed the work of classical and mid-twentieth century social theory?
Social theories are systematic ideas about the relationship between individuals and societies. Developing theoretical ideas is a little like putting on a pair of specialized glasses (like 3D glasses or night-vision goggles): theories, like specialized glasses, enable us to see things in a different way. Theories guide, but they also provoke: They may encourage us to pay more attention to something we had ignored, ask new or unusual questions that we don’t normally think about, or make arguments we so strongly disagree with that we are compelled to come up with a better approach. We don’t necessarily need social theories to make observations about the world around us, but they help us know what to look for.

The ambitions of social theorists are considerable, often nothing less than providing a way to understand how societies hold together, and how they organize and impact the lives of the individuals who live within them. The best and most lasting social theories have changed the way we understand societies, and the relationships between individuals within those societies, in fundamental ways. In this sense, social theory is central to the sociological imagination.

There is a wide range of different kinds of social theories. Some can be very grand—seeking to explain universal features of all societies—while others are much more modest, applying only to a single topic that sociologists study, such as race, or gender, or religion. For example, Karl Marx and his followers have argued in their theoretical writings that all societies are divided along economic lines and that the most important types of societal change occur only when the economic system of that society is radically altered. This is a very grand theory, one that claims to apply to all known human societies. On the other hand, there are social theories that are very specific to a particular time and place. Some very recent social theories, for example, have proposed that some of the new technologies that have emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (such as email, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media) are changing the nature of friendship and other relationships between individuals and groups. These latter types of focused theories, generally known as middle-range theories, apply to specific problems and have clearer and more limited goals.

Sociology is somewhat unusual among the social sciences in having multiple and often competing social theories and theoretical traditions. By contrast, economics, for example, has long had a single dominant theoretical system that all economists (and economics students) must learn. The multiplicity of theoretical traditions in sociology can be confusing at first. While it does take some effort to sort out the competing ideas and how they relate to one another, we hope to show you in this chapter that there are rewards to this effort as well. And in

What three common themes have all of the major sociological theories sought to address?
How are new technologies (like Skype) challenging classical theories of society?

spite of the abundance of competing theoretical traditions, there is also a great deal of dialogue among theorists and

theoretical traditions. In this chapter, we will emphasize both the key distinctions and the vital connections as we introduce the most influential of the social theories that have appeared in the past 150 years.

In spite of the diversity of social theory, there are three common themes that all of the major sociological theories have sought to address in one way or another (Joas and Knobl 2009, p. 18):

1. What is the nature of the individual, and what are the capacities of the individual to act in the context of society?
2. What is the basis for social order, that is, what is it that holds societies together?
3. What are the circumstances or conditions under which societies change?

Although the answers the major theoretical traditions we explore in this chapter give to these questions will vary, they define the central challenges all social theories (and theorists) face.

2 How Did the Early Social Theorists Make Sense of the World?

CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The foundations of modern sociology, and of social theory as we know it today, can be traced to the writings of a handful of key thinkers working in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. This was a period of enormous change, characterized by four key transitions: first, the change from an economy rooted in farming and agriculture to one based on industry and factory work (what is referred to as the Industrial Revolution); second, the movement of people from rural areas to cities; third, the change of the predominant form of government from monarchies to democracies, organized as sovereign nation-states (many of
The Evolution of Social Theory

Key Social Theorists

1970

1980

1990

2000

Neo-Marxism (late 1960s–present)

Analytical Sociology (founded by Merton & Coleman)

Feminist Social Theory (1970s–present)

Michel Foucault published Discipline and Punish

Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe (1990)

James Coleman published Foundations of Social Theory

1960

1950

1940

1930

Structural Functionalism/Conflict Theory/Symbolic Interactionism

World War II (1939–1945)

The Great Depression (1929–1939)

Max Weber

Economy and Society published posthumously

Herbert Blumer published Symbolic Interactionism

Talcott Parsons published The Power Elite

C. Wright Mills published The Sociological Imagination

Ralf Dahrendorf published Class and Class Conflict

Herbert Mead published Mind, Self, Society

Talcott Parsons published The Structure of Social Action

Herbert Mead Mind, Self, Society published posthumously

Max Weber

Economy and Society published posthumously

1870

1860

1850

1840

1830

1820

1810

Classical Social Theory (Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries)

Emile Durkheim published The Rules of Sociological Method

Emile Durkheim published Suicide

W.E.B. DuBois published The Souls of Black Folks

Max Weber published The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Emile Durkheim published The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

American Civil War Reconstruction (1865–1877)

American Civil War (1861–1865)

Karl Marx published volume 1 of Das Kapital

1850

1840

1830

1820

1810

Industrial Revolution (late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries)

Emile Durkheim

W.E.B. DuBois

Karl Marx

Max Weber

Michel Foucault

Key Social Theorists

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

Max Weber (1864–1920)

Georg Simmel (1858–1918)


Talcott Parsons (1902–1979)

Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009)

Herbert Mead (1863–1931)

Herbert Blumer (1900–1972)

Erving Goffman (1922–1982)

Michael Foucault (1926–1984)


James Coleman (1922–1995)

1800

1700

1600

1500

1400

1300

1200

1100

1000

900

800

700

600

500

400

300

200

100

0

Think About It

How are some of the ideas of classical social theorists, even those developed 100 years or more, reflected in the writings of contemporary social theorists?

Inspire Your Sociological Imagination

Which theorist(s) or theoretical tradition do you personally find the most attractive? Why is that theorist or theoretical tradition appealing to you?
the countries in Europe established their more or less permanent boundaries in this period); and, fourth, changes in terms of the role of faith, with a decline in religious influence in public life as nonreligious ideas became increasingly important. These transitions unfolded slowly, and they were not total. Even today, people still farm, many live in rural areas, there are still some undemocratic monarchies, and religion still has an important influence in many societies. But already in the late nineteenth century, many thinkers and early social scientists were sensing that the world was changing, and social theory and the new discipline of sociology emerged in response to these transformations and the sense of crisis they evoked.

We begin our discussion of classical social theory with the writings of Karl Marx, who posed each of the three questions central to social theory in a way that many later theorists would debate and elaborate. We then turn to the writings of four other early thinkers who explored these central themes in ways that have lasting importance: Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Refer to the Infographic on the previous page to explore a timeline of the evolution of social theory.

Why did Marx think that societies were so heavily shaped by their economic systems? His argument starts from the observation that all societies, except the simplest hunting and gathering societies, produce an economic surplus. That is, they collectively produce more goods than are required to meet their minimum physical needs if those goods were shared equally. But because it has never been the case that a society truly shares all goods equally, Marx believed that the starting point for the analysis of any society should be two questions: First, who takes possession of this surplus? And second, what means do they use to do so?

Based on the answers to these questions, in their famous work *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels (2011 [1848]) divide the history of all societies from antiquity up to their own time into three distinctive modes of production: ancient societies based on slavery; feudalism, which was characterized by largely agrarian societies with a tiny group of landowners; and capitalism, economies organized around market-based exchange. (They also wrote in a more speculative way about a possible future after capitalism for a socialist and, even later, a communist mode of production, but while these names would be used for later societies built on Marx's idea, they were not well-developed concepts with detailed blueprints in his writings.) Each of these modes of production consists of two parts—what Marx calls the forces of production, or the technological and productive capacity of any society at a given point in time, and have been the most influential in sociology start from one key principle: that the means by which humans produce the things they need to live are the essential foundations of any society. As a consequence, a society's economic system, and the relationships it creates between individuals and groups, is at the center of that society. Indeed, Marx argued that the history of any society or region is best understood through the history of its different economic systems and that a society’s economic system largely determines what is possible in the realm of politics and culture. Marx also believed a society’s economic system generated tensions between groups that ultimately give rise to conflict and in extreme cases social revolutions.

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the social relations of production, which are the relationships and inequalities between different kinds of people within the economy. Because of the overall importance of the economy in society, Marx thought that the mode of production would shape or even determine what kinds of legal and government systems were possible, as well as the kinds of ideas that people have about politics. He called the latter the “superstructure” of society, as distinct from the economic “base” of society (Marx 1978 [1859]; see Figure 21.1).

Marx’s analysis of the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1976 [1867]) is the starting point for his analysis of modern societies, as Marx rightly anticipated that capitalism would become the dominant economic system around the world. At the heart of capitalist societies, Marx believed, lies the contrast between members of the bourgeoisie, who possess special resources called capital that can be used to finance business investments, and everyone else. The ownership of capital is the critical dividing line between the bourgeoisie, whose members own property and can hire other people to work for them, and the working class, or proletariat. Because members of the proletariat own no capital, they must seek paid employment in order to meet their basic needs. Marx also acknowledged that other social groups such as shopkeepers, craftsmen, and farmers occupied a space between elite capitalists and workers. However, because larger enterprises can produce more cheaply than smaller ones, Marx predicted that these intermediate groups would shrink as small producers were driven into bankruptcy and forced to join the ranks of the proletariat. Modern capitalist societies, he thought, would increasingly be polarized between a very small bourgeoisie and an increasingly large working class.

Marx believed very strongly—and already by the middle of the nineteenth century there was evidence to support this view—that capitalism was a vastly more productive and efficient economic system than the feudalism which had preceded it. Yet despite its unprecedented productive capacity, millions of people starve every year, and billions of people around the world live in poverty. Why is this so? Why don’t all of the advances of capitalism make it possible to eliminate poverty and want? According to Marx, this is because capitalism deprives workers of the benefits of their efforts. Capitalists—the people who own businesses—typically have legal protections that allow them to keep most of the profits from the operation of their business, even though most or even all of the work may be done by their employees. Marx argued that the exploitation that results inevitably creates a vast number of impoverished individuals in any capitalist society.

While any mode of production can sustain itself for an extended period, even centuries, Marx thought that eventually a revolution would occur and a new mode of production would be established. In order for capitalism to arise, Marx argued that all of the hereditary privileges of landlords, including rules that allowed them to control the lives of agricultural workers (or serfs), had to be destroyed. This revolutionary change was brought about, according to Marx, by a rising class of capitalists who demanded economic freedoms despite incredible economic growth since the nineteenth century, capitalist economies have not been able to eliminate poverty. Why?
that did not exist under feudalism. Eventually, just as capitalists overthrew feudalism to create a new and dynamic economic system, Marx thought that the proletariat would create a revolution that would overthrow capitalism in favor of a socialist society. They would be motivated to do so, Marx thought, because over time capitalists, in order to maintain or increase their profit, would be driven to push down the wages of workers until those workers would finally revolt.

The world in which we live today, shaped by the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and most other communist countries since 1989, seems far removed from what Marx envisioned. If anything, capitalism seems more entrenched than ever. But capitalism has also changed in ways that Marx (and Engels) did not anticipate. Many capitalist societies, especially in the richer parts of the world, have developed large welfare states, which have established many programs such as social security, unemployment insurance, and free or low-cost health insurance designed to reduce poverty and inequality even in the context of thriving capitalist economies. These economic systems have grown far more diverse, and proven far more versatile, than Marx envisioned. Marx also underestimated the willingness of capitalists to pay workers decent wages, especially when they need to recruit workers with valuable skills, or in order to keep workers satisfied.

Yet in two respects Marx's model of society and social change seems very relevant today. First, the German thinker was an early theorist of what we now call globalization: He and Engels anticipated the spread of the capitalist economy to the entire world in the late 1840s, a revolutionary idea at the time, and one that proved remarkably insightful in light of later developments. And the analytical tools of his social theory do provide one way of understanding the role of economic exchange in fostering globalization. Second, the failure of socialism in places like Russia and Eastern Europe, which would seem to contradict Marx's assumptions, viewed in another way actually conforms very well to what Marx himself predicted. Recall that one of Marx's most fundamental claims is that capitalism, which is capable of building up tremendous productive capacity, is a prerequisite for socialism. Socialist leaders in countries like Russia and China attempted to skip this crucial stage in development by moving from what Marx would define as a feudal or agrarian mode of production directly to socialism. This proved to be impossible, and in responding to these failures leaders in these countries eventually resorted to reintroducing capitalism (as Marx might well have predicted). The resulting expansion of economic activity that the turn to capitalism has created, especially in China, has been impressive. If he were alive today, Marx would probably say that the true socialist revolution still lies ahead for both Russia and China, but only after a long period of capitalist growth and development.

□ Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim is properly regarded as one of the founding fathers of the discipline of sociology, and indeed he was the most famous sociologist in the world before World War I. Like Marx, Durkheim sought to try to understand the changes taking place around him during a period of extraordinary growth and change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Durkheim wondered how societies would continue to function in the face of these changes. Durkheim believed that the sociologist was responsible for answering these questions, almost like a doctor treating a patient—the sociologist's patient was society, and the sickness that needed to be cured was the various forms of social disorder that rapid industrialization was producing. Durkheim's contributions were many, but we will focus on three: his development of the concept of the social fact, his analysis of the roots of social solidarity, and his analysis of religion as a force in modern life.
Durkheim referred to as social facts. **Social facts**, according to Durkheim, are those regularities and rules of everyday life that every human community has. We are born into a world where there are rules and patterns of behavior that we have no choice but to adjust ourselves to. These facts are “social,” not physical, in that they arise from human action at some point in the past but exist outside of the control of any one person. Shortly after Durkheim defined the social fact, sociologists and other social scientists began to refer to them as **social forces** rather than social facts. The term **social force** connotes something broader than what Durkheim originally meant by **social fact**, but they are largely interchangeable. It was first through Durkheim that the idea of “the social” came into our understanding of human societies.

How do these social forces work? In asking this question, Durkheim was on to something that would become the foundation of nearly all social theories that would follow: Human behavior is not natural but learned; in other words, we are trained, or socialized, to act the ways that we do. And for Durkheim, one of the key things involved in the **socialization** process is the learning of norms of behavior, among the most important of all social forces that act upon us. **Norms** (rules of behavior that, if violated, will cause an individual to be sanctioned), are like physical walls in constraining our actions. We may want to do something (like taking an extra piece of pie, for example), but a norm against appearing to eat like a pig may stand in our way. One of the ways that we know norms exist is what happens when we violate them. Consider what happens when you break a social norm—such as talking on your phone during a movie. There will likely be a negative reaction from the other movie goers, most likely in the form of a **shush** or, if that fails, having some popcorn thrown at you or even having a security guard come and

**Social Facts**  
In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim 1982 [1895]), Durkheim made a case for the need for sociology by comparing it to the sciences of biology and physics. He argued that just like biology or physics, sociology examines a force in the world that is objective. By this he meant that it was a force that exists independently of our ability to control it. Just as, for example, gravity is a force that exists external to us and is not made by us, so too, Durkheim argued, did social forces exist objectively in the world. We cannot defy gravity (at least not easily), but we also cannot usually defy what

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Emile Durkheim (1858–1917).

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Why do people cooperate with one another? We often take this for granted, but in many everyday settings, like a crowded train, what Durkheim called “social solidarity” between people is essential for society to function.
According to Durkheim, what social forces regulate behavior so that we may live together?

warn you. In either case, we see an external pressure being exerted on our behavior, directing us to turn off the phone and sit quietly.

The idea that social forces are important for influencing individual behavior was put to the test in Durkheim’s next book, *Suicide* (Durkheim 1997 [1897]), which was not only a truly classic demonstration of the power of sociological analysis but also a landmark in the integration of social theory and empirical research. At first glance, the act of ending one’s own life appears to be the most private act imaginable, often rooted in the unique details of an individual’s personal life or psyche. Yet by stepping back and examining aggregate statistics on suicide—variations in the suicide rate between countries, or annual and regional fluctuations of suicides within the same country—Durkheim sought to demonstrate that the probability that a certain number of people will kill themselves at a given time and place is in fact very much influenced by factors such as religion (more suicides occur among Protestants than Catholics), gender (more men than women commit suicide), education (suicide is higher among the more educated than the less educated), and economic situation (e.g., suicides increase during periods of economic crisis). While these insights will not always help us to explain, let alone accept, a suicide committed by a friend or family member, they do underline in striking fashion a broader truth, namely that we as individuals are indeed embedded in larger social structures, structures that have the power to influence, even though we might not be aware of it, even our most intimate decisions. This is, in short, the concept of social structure applied to individual action.

**Social Solidarity** One of the critical questions that Durkheim examined throughout his career was how societies hold together; this is the problem of what Durkheim called *social solidarity* (Durkheim 1997 [1890]). Where do the shared morals and connections between individuals come from? To answer this question in his very earliest writings, Durkheim drew a contrast between two distinct forms of social solidarity—mechanical and organic solidarity—each of which connected with different kinds of shared morals reflecting the different kinds of societies in which they arise. Mechanical solidarity is the dominant form of solidarity in what Durkheim called “primitive” societies. It is a kind of solidarity in which society is held together like an inorganic substance, with component parts (the molecules) that are alike and interchangeable. Primitive societies (which Durkheim thought were exemplified by the native peoples in the Americas) are built around extended families or clans linked horizontally into tribes and then into peoples or “nations” such as the Iroquois or the Apache. They are characterized by a very minimal division of labor (or specialization of tasks), with an economic base consisting primarily of hunting and gathering or simple agriculture. Nearly identical life conditions, according to Durkheim, lead the members of such societies to see the world in a similar way and to have the same views on what constitutes proper behavior—there is little room for difference and thus no true individuality. These shared feelings concerning appropriate norms constitute the foundation upon which the society’s laws are grounded. The objective existence of those laws in turn reinforces a collective consciousness, to use Durkheim’s term, which sees certain ways of acting as right and others as wrong and is shared by all members of the community.

Emile Durkheim's ideas about primitive, or tribal societies (where he thought there was little room for individuality) were contrasted with modern societies where diversity is common. Both types of societies face the problem of creating social solidarity, but do it in very different ways.
By contrast, modern societies are characterized by organic solidarity, in which a very extensive division of labor and mutual dependence among people can be found. Modern societies, Durkheim wrote, resemble the ways in which a living organism operates, where specialized organs work together to hold the whole together. How then, according to Durkheim, did we move from a world of simple, "mechanical" societies to those of today characterized by a division of labor involving people who do lots of different things and may have little in common with one another? As the populations of simpler societies expanded outward and then, running up against natural or human barriers, became denser in cities, competition for survival among their members increased. One particularly successful response to this situation proved to be specialization: By acquiring skills as a carpenter, stonemason, or blacksmith for which there was now, given a higher population, a demand, one could raise the chances of survival for oneself and one's family.

Specialization, however, implies an increase in the exchange of goods if it is to be profitable. For Durkheim, then, population growth, a deepening specialization, and an expansion of commerce continually reinforce one another. Furthermore, as space becomes scarcer with higher population density and as economic opportunities appear elsewhere, more and more people will leave their original communities and seek more favorable conditions for survival in other locales. Over time, then, formerly homogeneous, closed societies will find their traditional identities and their high level of shared values undermined by novel ideas and new types of economic activity. A progressive dissolution of the original collective conscience is, according to Durkheim, the inevitable result of this heightened interaction and population mixing.

So what exactly holds these modern societies together, as it can no longer be the well-defined collective conscience and the detailed, punitive laws flowing from their characteristic of mechanical solidarity? Durkheim's first answer, one he partially shares with Karl Marx, is that specialization of necessity implies cooperation and mutual dependence. However, unlike Marx, Durkheim did not think that the division of labor necessarily creates conflict; in fact, he thought just the opposite! For example, the carpenter is dependent upon and, however indirectly, must cooperate with those who produce wood, nails, and tools; the tailor stands in the same relationship to those who make cloth, needles, scissors, and pins. This dependence and cooperation is even more apparent in manufacturing processes with a very extensive division of labor: An interruption in the flow of any single component can bring the collective task of assembling an automobile from thousands of unique parts to an immediate halt.

But as his social theory developed, Durkheim abandoned his original view about the sources of social solidarity in the modern world to advance a second answer. Modern societies, characterized by growing diversity and complexity, still require some widely-shared, sacred beliefs to hold people together. What kinds of beliefs could achieve this level of acceptance? Durkheim advanced a surprising answer: He suggested that the key to the forms of solidarity in modern societies lies in the fact that these societies guarantee individuals a measure of freedom that primitive societies did not. He even characterized this as the "cult of the individual." By this, Durkheim meant that in modern societies, we are freer to express our individual tastes, preferences, and interests because society does not seek to make everyone conform to the same set of beliefs about morality, and we perceive these individual rights as so central that they become sacred (and embedded in social institutions and the law).

Religion and Society Across his many writings on social solidarity, Durkheim maintained a careful interest in the role religion played in both primitive and modern societies. His last major book, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]), was an attempt to understand where religion came from by exploring religious practices in tribal societies. From his investigations, Durkheim developed a particular definition of religion as centering on the sacred: those objects, places, beliefs, and behaviors that are treated with exceptional deference. Durkheim's focus on the sacred is paralleled by a contrast between the sacred and the profane: those objects or behaviors that have no special religious significance. What was unique about Durkheim's view of the sacred is that it did not require reference to a supernatural deity. While many sacred objects (such as the Bible or Koran) or practices (Christmas) make reference to God, there are many other things that are sacred that do not. For example, for many Americans burning or desecrating the American flag is to violate a sacred (but not religious) object. People can believe just as strongly in some set of ideas that are not divinely inspired (freedom, nationalism, democracy, communism, Nazism, etc.) as others might in ideals that claim divine inspiration. While sacred beliefs may involve a God, it is also possible for widely-shared and deeply held values that do not involve a supernatural deity to play a similar role in society.

Durkheim's idea that divine forces alone are not what create our sense of what is sacred opens the door to a whole new way of understanding religion. If religion is not the creation of God or some other supernatural force, it must inevitably be a human creation. But why is religion so common in all societies? And how, when, and why do humans come to create (or recreate) these sacred practices? Durkheim's answer relates back to his general interest in social solidarity: Religion helps to knit societies or groups of people together. It provides individuals with a common set of beliefs about morality, and we perceive these together. It provides individuals with a common set of beliefs about morality, and we perceive these
Max Weber (1864–1920)

Classical Social Theory in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Weber’s analysis of motives stands in sharp contrast to Durkheim’s emphasis on social facts, which are characterized by their objectivity and by being external to the individual. Weber argued that in order to understand the motivations for behavior we need to get inside people’s heads and figure out how they interpret and give meaning to the world around them. In this way, Weber introduces a whole new dimension to the work of sociologists: interpretation of individual action. In his magnum opus Economy and Society, published shortly after his death, Weber writes that “Sociology is a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences” (Weber 1978 [1922], p. 4). This approach is known as interpretative sociology, a translation form the German word verstehen, which means understanding.

Interpretive Sociology: What Motivates Behavior?

Whereas Marx focused on material conditions and Durkheim on morality, Weber argued that there is something else we need to consider when we study societies: the motivations that guide behavior—in other words, the reasons we behave the way that we do. Weber believes that these reasons have changed over time.

How did Weber explain the principles or motivations behind social action?

Max Weber (1864–1920).
We can think about Weber’s distinctions in terms of the different reasons for attending class in college. The instrumental reasons are pretty straightforward: A student attends class because her goal is to graduate from college, perhaps in the hopes of finding a good career and making more money than she otherwise would. Coming to class will increase her chances of getting good grades, which will lead her to graduate with a strong GPA, which will enable her to land a good job, which will lead her to make a lot of money. In contrast, another student could come to class guided by value-rational principles, in which case he attends class because he believes in the value of education for its own sake, without thinking about any instrumental or self-interested outcomes it might provide him. Another student might come to class guided by emotions, as for example a fear that missing a class even when attendance is not required is just disrespectful. In this case, we would say his behavior expressed an affectual orientation. And finally, yet another student attends class because that is what her parents and grandparents did, and going to school is what she has been doing since kindergarten. It is, in other words, a tradition for which she doesn’t know any better.

In his most famous work of interpretative sociology, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2008 [1904]), Weber applied his concern with individual motivations for behavior to advance a new theory about why capitalism appeared earlier and grew faster in some parts of the world than in others. He argued that the influence of certain religious movements—notably Protestantism—seemed to be closely connected to those places that had the earliest and most successful capitalist economies. In particular, he argued that the appearance of strict forms of Protestantism (e.g., Calvinists and the early Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists) fundamentally altered market behavior in places where they were most numerous (first in Britain, America, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany and Switzerland, and later elsewhere) because these early strict Protestants believed that it was a sign that you were in God’s good graces if you became economically successful. This encouraged Protestants to work in a highly disciplined, methodical manner and then save and reinvest whatever they earned (as opposed to consuming it). Weber believed that this gave strict Protestants an advantage over market participants from other religious groups in Europe (most notably Catholics and other, less strict Protestants like Lutherans). Eventually, the success of the strict Protestants encouraged others to assume the work habits and investment practices if they were to survive in the marketplace. By the eighteenth century, then, a new set of distinctly modern behavior norms (“the spirit of modern capitalism”) had emerged out of what had been the religious attitudes (“the Protestant ethic”) of a small minority.

**Legitimacy and Authority** A second major contribution of Weber’s social theory concerns how and why people obey orders. Weber makes a famous distinction between power and authority. He defines power as one person’s capacity to do something regardless of resistance from someone else. That is, it is a person’s ability to achieve his or her objectives even if someone else wants to try to prevent it. An example of this would be when a ruler gets people to submit to his will and follow his orders by compelling them to do so through force or the threat of force. However, Weber argues that this is the exception; you can’t always get your way by using force. There are far more cases where governments (or even our superiors) invoke what Weber called authority to get us to do things. Where does this authority come from? Most of the time people tend to voluntarily obey orders, that is, they accept the authority of their rulers. But why? Weber explored the sources of authority by developing a theory of why and how leaders gain what he called legitimacy. When authority figures have legitimacy, we obey them not because of the threat of force but because we believe obeying their orders is the right thing to do. And in this way, Weber argues, the most successful political regimes are those that are able to legitimize their rule. As with Weber’s basic proposition that behavior is guided
by how people interpret the world and give meaning to it, he argues that voluntary obedience to authority comes as a result of people interpreting the ruler to have legitimacy.

Weber distinguishes between different kinds of legitimacy, each connected to different interpretations of why one should voluntarily obey the ruler. Weber argued that there are three distinct types of domination: those that rest on traditional authority (legitimacy arising out of tradition), charismatic authority (legitimacy that arises out of the perception that a leader is endowed with special powers or gifts), or legal-rational authority (legitimacy based on explicit rules). Weber claims that the vast majority of societies, not only in the pre-nineteenth-century West but also in his time in China, India, and elsewhere, were built around forms of traditional authority. Under this form of authority, those who rule are obeyed because they exercise their power in a manner that has been sanctified by time and tradition. The legitimacy flowing from tradition in turn extends beyond the state to the hierarchical social structure upon which it rests. Traditional authority is common in societies with rigid social structures, like those in aristocratic Europe in the Middle Ages.

How can change ever come to traditional societies structured around extended families and hierarchically arranged status groups? Weber was especially fascinated by the role played by key individual leaders whom he saw as having charisma. The term charisma is derived from a Greek word meaning “gift of grace.” Over and over in traditional societies, according to Weber, individuals have appeared who claim special powers or gifts. Most famously, these have been classic religious figures—the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha—but the idea of charisma can apply to modern social and political leaders as well (for example, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Adolf Hitler all could be said to be charismatic). If such figures are to attract a following (as opposed to being seen as crackpots), they must demonstrate their special powers through extraordinary deeds such as miracles. Belief in a leader’s charisma in turn inspires people to leave their families and status groups and instead join a new, mixed community of disciples. In this way a charismatic figure possesses the power, according to Weber, to break through the constraints of traditional authority to create new forms of domination built upon personal charisma. This authority is potentially revolutionary because the charismatic leader calls into question traditional norms and rules and replaces them with new moral guidelines revealed to the leader by a higher, godly power. Thus in the West, in Weber’s view, the ever-growing number of Jesus’s believers called into question traditional Roman family ties and status hierarchies by creating a community to which all—including women and slaves—were welcomed and within which all were equal. During the western Middle Ages, the Christian community was far from equal in reality, but the idea of the equality of all before God remained a powerful, radical ideal, just as did similar ideas in Islam.

Weber also identified another possible source of revolutionary change in the transition away from traditional authority: the rise of what he called legal-rational authority. This is most obviously displayed in the rise of one of the pillars of modern life: bureaucracy, a type of organization that has rules and responsibilities for each position spelled out. Bureaucracy was most efficient and effective, Weber argued, when it was staffed by civil servants who were chosen and promoted based on merit, not on family ties (as it typically would in places ruled by tradition). Further, when bureaucracies operated on the basis of rules and laws that were applied equally to everyone, they became most successful and less corrupt. Although today we often question whether bureaucracies are truly efficient (as when the rules they make rub us the wrong way, or “red tape” needlessly slows everything down), there is no question that bureaucratic governance has become the dominant form of governance around the world. By the time of Weber’s death in 1920, government bureaucracies in the West had already grown very large, and since that time their expansion has continued largely unabated, and spread all across the world. Bureaucratic forms of administration are not limited to governments; they have also been taken up by large and medium-sized private companies as well, which often employ rules and procedures quite similar to those of government bureaucracies (and often generate similar complaints by employees or customers).

What is the distinction between power and authority, according to Weber?

Status Groups and Social Closure Weber’s contributions to social theory also included an important theory of what he called status groups, by which he meant groups of people with similar kinds of attributes or identities such as those based as religion, ethnicity, or race. Recall that Karl Marx had argued that classes and class conflict arising out of the economic system of any society were the central source of tension (and ultimately revolution) in any society. Weber acknowledged that economic class conflict was sometimes important, but conflicts between religious groups or racial and ethnic groups were often just as important or even more so. In contrast to economic classes, Weber emphasized that status groups are based on communities of members that share a common identity that can arise from many different sources. We all have various potential groups we could identify with; for example, depending on the families we are born into (and the religion and race or ethnicity our families confer upon us) or identities we develop as we get older (such as our occupation, our education, our sexuality, or communities we may voluntarily join like a neighborhood association or a feminist activist group). But which of these statuses become a source of our conscious thoughts and actions depends...
in part on which are organized into communities of similar people. An individual may be a Catholic, gay, a woman, able-bodied, from California, with parents born in Mexico; she may aspire to be an actress, a volleyball player, or a fan of Lady Gaga. Which of those possible identities becomes the source of status-group membership depends in part on which have distinctive communities or organizations capable of influencing people to actively identify with them.

The example of Lady Gaga also points to an important distinction between those statuses that become the basis for group conflict. Lady Gaga fans may very well consider themselves members of a group (Gaga has publicly referred to her fans as “little monsters”), but they do not participate in organized efforts on the basis of their interest in Gaga’s music to claim meaningful rewards or opportunities. By contrast, at various points in history and even today, one’s religion, sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status have been meaningful factors in access to jobs or other kinds of opportunities, in limiting what job you can aspire to, who you can date or marry, where you can live, and whether you have access to membership in desired social clubs or groups. Status-group struggles, Weber argued, have been an important aspect of every society’s stratification system, that is, those inequalities between individuals and groups that persist over time. Weber did not deny that conflict between classes could be important, such as when unions demand higher wages from their employers, but he thought that Marx’s emphasis on class struggle as the motor force of history neglected many other ways in which group conflict influenced the process of historical change.

Weber not only advanced a broader conception of group conflict and struggle than Marx, but he also introduced an important concept for understanding how groups seek to gain advantage over other groups: by trying to exclude nonmembers from gaining access to opportunities (or, to put it another way, groups try to monopolize opportunities for their own members). He called this process social closure, a term that captures the various ways that groups seek to close off access to opportunities by other groups. Social closure can be formalized in law (such as in the American South after the Civil War, or the system of apartheid in South Africa, where blacks were often legally prevented from attending the same schools, using certain public facilities, marrying whites, or living in the same neighborhoods as whites). But closure need not be written into law; it can occur in less formal ways. For example, closure of opportunities to enter the ranks of top management in large corporations for women and minorities persists even after civil rights laws were changed to give everyone equal opportunity. How? One way is that companies can change hiring and promotion policies in subtle ways to favor white men, or a certain kind of corporate culture in which women or minorities may be excluded can persist (Kantor 1977; Dobbin 2011).

How does social closure explain how some status groups seek to gain advantage over others?

Georg Simmel (1858–1918)

The German sociologist Georg Simmel was a contemporary and friend of Max Weber. The social theory he pioneered built upon a key insight about the nature of social order: Any individual stands at the intersection point of overlapping social circles, and societies are built upon these social circles (Simmel 1964). For example, we belong to a family; have groups of friends or colleagues at school or in the workplace; may also belong to a religious community, a neighborhood association, a sports club, or a political group; and have groups of friends or acquaintances because of shared passions or hobbies. For Simmel, a key aspect of the rise of modern societies from early types of human communities was the widening of our social circles. Whereas in earlier times membership in a single social circle—like that centered on a local Catholic parish—might have dominated or dictated many other aspects of an individual’s life, by the beginning of the twentieth century individuals had much greater freedom. They are able to choose their friends and acquaintances across different spheres of life, independently of one another, forming an intricate web of relationships, as he called them. If Simmel were
experience at one time or another of being a stranger, and when that happens it is an awkward and difficult position to be in (but a sociologically important one to understand). Simmel’s insight about the stranger raised larger questions about the nature of relationships between individuals, and within or between groups. Social distance is the concept he introduced to describe the quality of the relationships between people, and later sociologists would develop measures of the degree of closeness or distance that individuals and groups feel towards one another.

What are the implications of these insights? On the one hand, it means that as adults we enjoy an unprecedented degree of latitude in shaping our social relations according to common interests, views, and preferences. While as recently as a few decades ago members of many ethnic and religious groups came under great pressure from their families and communities to avoid close relationships with those from outside of their group, this is much less the case today (as witnessed by rising rates of intermarriage across ethnic, religious, and even national lines in both North America and Western Europe). On the other hand, the number and diversity of social circles to which greater freedom of choice permits us to belong also leads to conflicts, not only over how best to spend our time but also over values and norms of behavior attached to particular circles that may not be compatible with one another. Thus the young corporate lawyer might have to decide, for example, whether to stay late every night at the office like other coworkers or violate this unwritten expectation of long working hours and leave earlier in order to spend more time with her partner or family (and time with one’s family is also an important value). Or we may find that the attitudes expressed by our work colleagues or the language they use violates our religious or political beliefs, and that we therefore must choose whether to give short shrift to these beliefs or speak up and object, thereby risking alienating those with whom we spend many hours daily. At any point, such conflicts may give rise to feelings of social distance, or turn a potential insider into a “stranger.”

Simmel noted that the way we see ourselves, and which social groups we most value, is not necessarily the same way as how others see us. For example, in Simmel’s time, many people would have identified him as Jewish because of his last name, regardless of whether he actively participated in a Jewish religious community. (For many years, in spite of his brilliant scholarship, Simmel was blocked from a university appointment because he was a Jew). For Germans at the time, Jewishness was more of an ethnic than a religious identity, and for many this identity would have been the primary lens through which we see ourselves and which social groups we most value.

In developing a theory of how individuals fit into social circles, Simmel provided a key concept for sociology: the idea of social distance, or more specifically the attempt to map how close or distant individuals or social groups are from one another. Simmel’s ideas about social distance and its implications for understanding how societies work took a variety of forms. He most famously deployed this idea in an essay called “The Stranger” (Simmel 1971 [1908]), where he identified a “stranger” as someone who is a member of a group but never accepted as a full member (strangers can be contrasted with “outsiders” who are never part of the group, or “insiders” who are fully part of the group). Elsewhere, Simmel wrote widely about the experience of Jews in Europe, who embodied an example of a group that could live in societies without being granted full membership. We all know about strangers in our own circles – people who are part of a group, but often excluded or not invited to fully participate in group activities. Indeed, all of us have had the
they viewed people of Jewish ancestry. This would later and tragically, after the Nazis rose to power in Germany, become the foundation for attempts to eliminate all Jews in Europe during the Holocaust, as individuals were rounded up whether or not they ever actively participated in the Jewish faith. While this is an extreme example, it is symptomatic of a common feature of modern society. While our family members and closest friends may be aware of all of the overlapping social groups to which we belong, and even which of those group memberships are most important to us, outsiders or passing acquaintances will most often focus on one of our multiple identities—our nationality, race, ethnic background, religion, regional origin, or place of residence—and declare it to be primary by drawing conclusions about us based on what they hold to be “average” or “common” traits of persons with those characteristics.

Simmel’s work also began to bring some insights from mathematics into the study of the social world, using ideas imported from geometry (and geometric space) to characterize the relationships among individuals. Simmel’s insights about the formal properties of groups provided the foundation for the rise of network analysis, the study of how individuals are connected to other individuals and the consequences of those connections. In his famous analysis of the distinction between dyads (two-person groups) and triads (groups of three), Simmel noted an important distinction in how all groups function based solely on their size. Smaller groups have different properties than larger groups. Dyads can exist only as long as both members participate. Because of this, dyadic relationships create mutual dependence (even in situations of great inequality, such as between a master and a slave—the master relies on the slave to perform certain tasks). By contrast, in a triad, no one individual can eliminate the group simply by leaving. Triads allow individual members the possibility of engaging in strategic action by playing one member off against another. And there can be multiple dyads within a triad; in a group of six people, there are five people you can have a relationship with, multiplying the complexities of the group.

The full value of these insights was not immediately clear to Simmel’s contemporaries, but later sociologists would recognize them as the foundation for creating theories of society. For example, how do new ideas become popular? Often it is through social networks, groups of people who are tied together in ways they don’t even notice. (See Figure 21.3 for a simple example of a social network: the lines show the ties between individuals, with Zoe indirectly connecting several different groups together through her ties.) To take one example, consider how rumors spread: One person may tell a friend something, and the friend will tell another person completely unknown to the first person, beginning a remarkable chain of action that can in some cases have very important consequences. While many rumors may be harmless, the same kind of chain of interaction can spread information about a protest, whether or not a movie is any good, or how to cheat on your taxes and get away with it. With the use of mathematical tools, social network analysts have been able to generalize Simmel’s insights into a wide range of different applications, from health behaviors to fads to patterns of housing segregation.


W. E. B. Du Bois’s long and varied career as a social scientist, historian, journalist, essayist, and political activist (among many other activities, he was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]) was extraordinary in many ways. Du Bois’s race, however, prevented him from attaining the prestigious academic post that his penetrating scholarship would have normally entitled him to. His overriding concern as a sociologist and social theorist was the problem of race and racial inequality in American society, although his theoretical writings contained powerful insights that were relevant to all disadvantaged groups and had implications for the study of group conflict everywhere.
The dominant theories about race in Du Bois’s time claimed that European whites and blacks were unequally endowed in terms of intelligence, capacity for hard work, and ability to be good citizens. These theories stressed that there were deep-seated biological reasons why European whites were superior to blacks and that the poverty and inequality experienced by African Americans in the North and the South were the result of these innate differences. If racial differences were rooted in biological differences, then it hardly mattered whether American society gave African Americans equal opportunity, as they would be fundamentally incapable of grasping those opportunities.

Du Bois rejected these assertions, arguing across his 60-year career that racial inequality was not rooted in biological differences but rather manufactured in American society. He developed a theory of how racism—the assumption that members of a racial group are inherently inferior to other races—prevented blacks from achieving at the same level as whites. At every turn, throughout his career, Du Bois had to challenge the entrenched view of white superiority, which denied that racism mattered.

How did racism play this role, according to Du Bois? In his first major book, a study of the black community in Philadelphia in the late 1890s, The Philadelphia Negro (Du Bois 1995 [1899]), Du Bois showed that every aspect of the lives of African Americans was shaped by the limited opportunities they were afforded. Philadelphia was home to the largest black population of any city in the North at the time, and Du Bois’s research into the black community of Philadelphia was supported and funded by philanthropists and reformers associated with the University of Philadelphia. He carried out a remarkable data-collection effort, conducted in just 15 months, employing multiple methods in his study. These included the use of statistical data about the neighborhoods where Philadelphia’s black population lived, what kinds of jobs they held, and how they were divided along economic lines. Du Bois supplemented this statistical portrait with interviews on a house-to-house basis, where he explored the social conditions of life in the black community beyond what statistical data could show. For example, he explored how the black poor survived on low incomes, how marriages and families were organized and functioning, and how relatively privileged blacks viewed poor blacks. The latter analysis would give rise to a concern about what Du Bois viewed as the failure of black “elites” to help poor blacks and “uplift the race,” as Du Bois famously put it in a later essay (Du Bois 2008 [1903]).

The role of racism in American life, and how it impacted African Americans, was dissected in a different way in Du Bois’s most famous and influential work, The Souls of Black Folks (Du Bois 1997 [1903]). Here, in a collection of essays and studies still widely read today, Du Bois presented more fully his view that stereotypes about blacks as lazy, unintelligent, or prone to crime were in fact the result of their place in American society. In the more sociological parts of the book, Du Bois argued that a lack of educational opportunities, not innate intelligence, produced the appearance of lower intelligence among blacks. Lack of economic opportunity, by contrast, made it appear that blacks did not work as hard as whites (a myth all the
Inequality is a central topic in sociology, a concern of sociologists working in many different subfields, and a long-standing concern of social theorists. We can trace the different conceptions of inequality by looking at how social theorists have examined it and the debates they have generated. Karl Marx believed that inequality centered on the relationship between a dominant class and a subordinate class in any society. Social theorists after Marx—including Weber, Du Bois, and Simmel—focused on how important types of inequalities arise out of group memberships that may not be strictly about class. Max Weber called these groups status groups and noted that they frequently try to create advantages for their members in comparison with competing groups.

While these theoretical traditions emphasized how inequality produces injustice, there is an alternative tradition in social theory that argues that inequality is a natural condition of all human societies. For Emile Durkheim, the growing complexity of modern society requires a division of labor based on specialization (in which some people learn the skills to do some things, while others develop different sets of skills). Durkheim’s view that inequality is a natural outcome of the rise of modern society was extended even further in the work of structural functionalists, who saw inequality as an inevitable and necessary feature of all societies.

Contemporary social theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu, have explored some of the complexities of inequality, such as how classes also differ along cultural lines (for instance in having distinct forms of speech and kinds of cultural knowledge). Other theorists have gone further to argue that to understand where an individual stands in the inequality system of any society, we need to look at how inequalities overlap with one another.

Are inequalities of race and gender just as universal as inequalities of class? How do these types of inequalities produce injustice for some groups?

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore argued that economic inequality is universally necessary in order to motivate the most talented individuals to seek the most socially important positions in society. How can this hypothesis explain the motivation to attend medical school?

Think About It
While inequalities do seem to be present in all societies, does that make them a necessary component of all societies (as functionalist theorists have thought)? Is it even possible to reduce or eliminate some types of inequality? Choose one common type of inequality and consider what kinds of changes in a society like the United States today are necessary in order to eliminate that inequality?

Inspire Your Sociological Imagination
What are some of the most important kinds of inequalities you observe in your daily life? How do those inequalities impact the society around you, for example in the ways that individuals relate to one another or how you and others around you interact with key institutions in your lives?
more ridiculous in the face of the back-breaking work of many southern Blacks involved in agricultural or domestic labor). And he noted that crime always tends to be higher in communities with high poverty rates, and because of poverty and racial segregation, African Americans tended to be concentrated in poor communities. In short, Du Bois argued, the social structure of American society was the culprit and cause of the appearance of inferiority in the black community.

Du Bois's most famous concept in Souls was a theory of how racism and social structure impacts individual blacks, producing in them what he called a kind of “double consciousness.” Because of their marginalization from the mainstream of American life, Du Bois argued that unlike white Americans, blacks had to live multiple lives, one as a black person and one as an American. Further, because black Americans saw themselves as devalued in the eyes of white Americans, they suffered from having to view themselves through the eyes of others. In a famous passage, Du Bois defined this double consciousness as “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unrecognised strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 1997 [1903], p. 6). The idea of multiple selves suggested a novel way in which social structure imposes psychological costs on blacks, and it proved to be an idea that later social scientists would apply to many other disadvantaged groups.

Du Bois’s writings on social structure also examined the larger context of American politics and race relations. As political leader in the NAACP and other organizations, he was continually examining how the larger social and political context of American society hindered the progress of African Americans. He wrote about the devaluing of the contributions of black soldiers in World War I (who provided important contributions to a number of key campaigns in the war), the exclusion of blacks from having the opportunity to work in many branches of government, and the repeated failures of presidents and elected officials to live up to their promises to support civil rights for African Americans. His most important book in this vein was his study of the tragedy of the post–Civil War Reconstruction in the South (Du Bois 1938). In contrast to the standard historical accounts of the time, which claimed the post–Civil War governments run by African Americans were corrupt and incompetent, Du Bois argued that the Reconstruction governments struggled against virulent white violence and obstructionism at every turn in their efforts to build a new political system in the South in which African Americans and poor whites would be able to participate. Dismissed at the time, later scholarship on Reconstruction has confirmed many of the insights of Du Bois’s historical account. Explore A Sociological Perspective on the previous page to further explore how Du Bois and other social theorists have explained inequality.

According to Du Bois, what are the diverse ways in which racism influences the lives of African Americans?

Why did Du Bois argue that black Americans experience a “double consciousness”?

Du Bois’s view of the “double consciousness” of African Americans was continually reinforced by the practice of segregation, especially in the American South, which prevented blacks from participating in the mainstream of American life.
While the classical tradition in social theory can be seen as represented in the writings of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Du Bois, the interests of social theorists began to shift in new and unexpected directions from the late 1930s onward. Leadership in the development of social theory and sociology as a whole passed from being primarily located in Europe (even Du Bois had been educated in Germany and was influenced by European social theorists) to America. At the center of these new directions was the widely discussed work of the Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Parsons’ effort to develop what he called a functionalist theory of society seemed to solve some of the dilemmas raised in the classical works of social theory and sought to provide nothing less than a general theory of society. But Parsons’ work spawned enormous controversy, and his writings (like those of Marx) would serve as a major source of critical reflection and theoretical debate for other theorists in this era. This middle period, which we can date from approximately 1937 (when Parsons’ first great book was published) to the mid-1960s, saw both the elaboration of the functionalist model of society and the development of several key alternatives to Parsons’ functionalist theory—most importantly conflict theory and symbolic interaction. In this section we briefly discuss each of these new theoretical traditions and some of their key insights.

□ Structural Functionalism

Talcott Parsons was for a time in the 1950s and the 1960s the most influential sociologist in the world. His career-long effort to elaborate a functionalist theory of society, which sought to explain key aspects of social life by examining the functions they serve for society as a whole, represented a grand attempt to provide a unified theory for sociology. In the early part of his career, Parsons wrote what would quickly become one of the most important books in the history of sociological theory, a two-volume study of mostly European social theorists entitled *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons 1967 [1937]). In this book, Parsons brought the writings of Durkheim and Weber to the attention of American and English-language sociologists and tried to make their ideas compatible with one another.

It was after World War II, however, that Parsons began to build up his functionalist theory of society in a series of essays and books published in the 1950s (e.g., Parsons 1951; Parsons and Smelser 1956). In these and later writings, Parsons argued that the key elements of any society—including the economy, culture, and government—were all organized around the broader (and often hidden) needs of the society as a whole. He came to describe this as structural functionalism, that is, a theory of society in which individuals, groups, and the institutions of any society are guided by an overarching social system. The social system contains powerful norms and values (widely shared understandings of appropriate behavior and what is right and good, respectively), and institutions (enduring practices of society and the organizations that manage those practices). Within the social system, individuals take on certain roles, such as “student” or “teacher,” or “worker” or “boss,” throughout life, and while in those roles they tend to act a
certain way (to follow an appropriate script, like an actor). The structural-functionalist theory emphasizes that norms, values, and institutions arise and persist because they prove to be good ways of maintaining social order (and if they stop playing this positive role, Parsons thought, they will eventually disappear).

While Parsons spent an enormous amount of time elaborating this framework in his later writings, examining specific norms, values, roles, and institutions, the critical ideas of structural functionalism had three key legs: (1) enduring features of society can ultimately be explained in terms of their “functional” purpose—societies develop religion, for example, as a way of creating common values or accounting for things that cannot be explained without reference to a supernatural being; (2) individuals are heavily shaped and constrained by the social system in which they are living; and (3) conflicts are minimized by the social system as individuals learn (or “know”) and more or less accept their “place.”

What about social change? How do societies change over time? In the structural-functionalist view, social change is something that happens gradually, as institutions adapt to meet new challenges. In contrast to the way Karl Marx envisioned social change happening through revolutionary class struggles, Parsons and his collaborators believed that social change happened much like the theory of evolution in biology. Evolutionary biology has demonstrated that animal species adapt over time through a process of natural selection, where advantageous traits were selected over traits that were not, generation by generation. Parsons saw this metaphor as useful for understanding how a society

According to structural functionalism, what roles do norms, values, and institutions play in society?

as a whole (and its component parts) evolved as well. Those features of any society that are dysfunctional are slowly weeded out in favor of those features that are helpful.

Structural functionalism seemed to provide a way of integrating the diverse elements of any society into a single, coherent theory. But, as many critics would point out, it did so only by ignoring many important aspects of contemporary societies that did not seem to fit the theory. We will consider two of the most important streams of criticism of Parsons and structural functionalism in the next section.

Conflict Theory

One of the major objections to functionalist social theory was that it seemed to suggest that societies are largely conflict-free places, in which all of the different parts of society serve important functions and fit together more or less harmoniously. Structural-functionalist theory, in its most extreme form, did indeed suggest that the order-imposing elements of society were vastly more powerful than the conflict-generating elements, such as those arising out of the inequalities between groups that Marx, Weber, Simmel, and Du Bois had seen as central to all societies. Parsons and other functionalisits argued that these classical social theorists tended to exaggerate the role of conflict, especially insofar as social change was concerned. Parsons held that societies mostly evolve; revolutions such as the one that occurred in Russia in 1917 may give the appearance of a radical change, but they are rare and, even after a revolution, day-to-day life may change less than we often think. Further, as one influential but friendly early critic of Parsons suggested, even conflict could serve valuable functions, helping to force institutional change when no other mechanism could do so (Coser 1956).
But this revision of Parsons did not satisfy many of his critics. Rather than viewing conflict between individuals and groups as a source of deviant behavior, a number of social theorists in the late 1950s and 1960s proposed an alternative to functionalist social theory that came to be known as conflict theory. One of the founding figures of conflict theory was the German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009), who argued that while Marx’s view of social change based on class struggle was outdated, it was nevertheless true that many types of economic conflict still exist in the modern world (Dahrendorf 1959). Some of these conflicts had been channeled into the relationship between unions and employers or into the policies of governments (which can tax corporations and rich individuals and redistribute wealth through social welfare programs that provide support for poor or low-income individuals and families). Dahrendorf also argued that noneconomic conflicts, such as over who has the authority to make decisions within organizations, are an often hidden type of conflict but one that has significant social consequences. The problem with Parsons’s functionalist approach, then, was that it neglected the importance of such conflicts and presented us with an image of society that centered too much around apparent consensus. As one sociologist put it (Horton 1966), the rise of conflict theory gave sociologists a choice between a “sociology of consensus” (i.e., structural functionalism) and a “sociology of conflict” (i.e., conflict theory).

The most popular and influential work in the conflict tradition was that of C. Wright Mills (1918–1962), who wrote a series of books on class and power that emphasized how America in the 1950s was governed by a “power elite” that strove to protect its privileges and dominated the making of government policy (Mills 1956). (In a later book, Mills also famously introduced the concept of the “sociological imagination” as a way of describing the mission of the discipline of sociology). For Mills, the power elite consisted of the top ranks of the leading political, economic and military institutions in American society, and this power elite was able to exclude ordinary citizens from exerting much influence over government policies. For Mills, the classical notion of democracy—rule by the people—was a fiction in the context of the power wielded by those at the top.

Conflict theory evolved in the 1960s to become the principle home for those sociologists seeking new ways of thinking about inequality and social injustice. The popularity of conflict theory stemmed in large part from the growing sense that functionalist theory did not seem to provide a very good way of explaining why inequalities exist within society, or at its extreme even seemed to some to justify those inequalities as functional for societies. For example, in one famous essay first published in 1945, functionalist social theorists argued that economic inequality was a necessary component of society in order to encourage the most talented individuals to pursue careers that would be the most useful for society as a whole (Davis and Moore 1945). The authors of this paper argued that no one would undergo the long training period necessary to become a doctor unless doctors received more pay, and because societies need high-quality doctors it is necessary to provide the financial incentives to ensure an adequate supply of such people in the medical field.

By contrast, conflict theory placed these social and economic inequalities under the microscope, noting that inequalities of wealth and power are not natural outcomes but rather persist because privileged individuals and groups go to great lengths to protect them. Some employers treat their workers poorly or may use legal or illegal means to prevent workers from organizing unions. Even professions that claim to serve the public interest may develop tools to enhance their incomes or dominate their clients. Physicians (a profession we don’t normally think of as exploiting others) created organizations like the American Medical Association that worked very hard to ensure that the supply of doctors would be limited by law to those who complete a licensed medical school. By holding down competition, physicians are able to receive higher fees than they otherwise might.

Conflict theorists argued that inequality inevitably produces tensions between groups

Conflict theorists highlighted the importance of conflict in any society, especially in producing social change.
and individuals over who gets what. People who feel oppressed usually eventually begin to struggle against those who take advantage of them (whether via sexism, racism, economic wealth, or other forms of inequality). Sometimes these struggles happen informally (workers may refuse to give their bosses their best effort), and sometimes they occur through unions or social movements. In highlighting the importance of inequality as a form of social conflict and struggle, conflict theory sought to revive some of the classical concerns of Marx and Weber, in particular in their respective writings on class and status-group inequality. But conflict theory never became a full-fledged system of social thought, as some of its early thinkers had thought it might. Having reminded sociologists that societies do not always function smoothly and without conflict, it was not always clear where conflict theory could go next. While conflict is unquestionably an important component of social life, a theory of conflict was just too vague to be the basis for a new social theory.

Symbolic Interactionism

Another critical response to functionalism known as symbolic interactionism emerged in the same period, this time in the United States. Its founding theorists were two scholars who taught at the University of Chicago—philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Herbert Blumer (1900–1987), a sociologist and student of Mead’s (see Mead 1934; Blumer 1969). While Talcott Parsons and his followers saw individuals and individual action as heavily shaped by society and its constituent parts, symbolic interactionism turns this idea on its head, arguing that social order starts from individuals and the meanings they give to objects, events, and relationships with others.

As its name suggests, symbolic interactionism focuses on how people interact with one another and the role that symbols play in those interactions. Symbolic interactionists argue that understanding everyday social interaction—from basic things such as people eating together, being in a classroom together, or greeting each other on the street—lies at the heart of understanding society, as it is through such interactions that both individual identities as well societies are formed. In this way, while most sociological theories focus on big-picture topics like the economy, religion, politics, or society more generally, symbolic interactionism zooms in to focus on everyday human behavior and the ways in which we interact with one another.

Why study everyday human behavior? What could such everyday things as people eating together possibly tell us about society? The answer, according to symbolic interactionists, is that what distinguishes humans from other species is that in our everyday interactions we interpret and give meaning to objects, activities, and people in ways that other species do not. Mead argued that that what distinguishes humans from animals and defines what it is to be a social being is that we are both subjects who act in the world as well as objects who exist in the world and are interpreted and defined by others. To explain this, Mead divided identities into two parts, what he called the “I” and the “Me.” The Me represents the objective dimension of the self—that which is interpreted by others—while the I represents the subjective dimension of the self—in other words, that part of our self-understanding that interprets how others see us, and that decides how to act based on how our actions will appear to others. In these ways, symbolic interactionists

Why does this particular cake have special meaning? Symbolic interactions highlight the importance of the symbolic meanings we attach to objects, gestures, and conversations, which might otherwise seem like ordinary events.
argue that our sense of self comes directly from the evaluations of others.

But how, then, as a conflict theorist of this era might ask, do the powerful inequalities and distinct social roles that characterize societies impact interaction? Symbolic interactionists were very aware of this issue, noting that some peoples’ evaluations and opinions count more than others’, depending on their relationships. For example, Mead distinguished between different groups of people who provide us with our sense of self, the major distinction being between what he called significant others and the generalized other. Significant others are people who we know closely and whom we interact with on a personal level, such as our family members or our close friends. In contrast, the generalized other represents an abstract group we do not know personally but for which we have a general idea of how they think about us and expect us to behave—for example, abstract categories such as “teachers,” “neighbors,” or “police officers” are all examples of generalized others. In a sense, while significant others represent ideas and opinions of close friends or family members, generalized others represent the ideas and opinions of the larger community to which we belong. In each case, our behavior is shaped by the opinions others have of us, and when we decide how to behave we consider the values of these others.

If our sense of self is determined by the opinions others have of us, and we all want others to have good opinions of us, it makes sense that we will try to behave in a way that will lead others to interpret us in a positive way. This idea forms the basis of the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who, more than any other sociologist, popularized interactionist ideas in the 1950s and 1960s. In a classic work entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959), Goffman employs the famous Shakespeare quote that “all the world is a stage” to compare social life to theater, arguing that our behaviors are similar to the performances of actors—like actors, we play roles, follow scripts, and have our performances evaluated by an audience (in this case, other people with whom we interact with in our day-to-day lives). In this “dramaturgical” approach to social life, Goffman argues that we are constantly seeking to influence how people interpret our behaviors by strategically acting in certain ways to achieve a desired interpretation from others. Consider, for example, going on a job interview. We want the person who is interviewing us to think that we are organized, hard working, and ambitious. How might we give off these impressions? On the one hand there are things we can say about ourselves, but on the other hand there are also nonverbal things we can do to our appearance and the way that we carry ourselves to signal these qualities: We wear a suit instead of ripped jeans, we sit up on the chair instead of slouching, we comb our hair in a conservative way instead of letting it go wild, and so on. In such ways, Goffman says we engage in “impression management”—strategically organizing our behavior to communicate certain ideas about who we are.
How Has a New Generation of Social Theory Evolved?

Sociology and the leading social theories underwent an enormous transition in the 1960s and the early 1970s as social movements around the world demanded, and sometimes won, important types of social change (Sica and Turner 2006). This was, after all, the era of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the environmental movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the beginnings of the gay and lesbian rights movement, among others. In this vortex, traditional ways of understanding society, including some of those that had only recently been popular, were thrown aside. For example, the dominant position of functionalism was dislodged by the late-1960s, and functionalism came to be widely (although not always accurately) dismissed as a theory that justified the inequalities of the existing social order. Conflict theory disappeared as well, replaced by other theories of inequality that emerged or reemerged in this period. Symbolic interactionism, in contrast to the other midcentury traditions, did remain vibrant, and some of the key insights of symbolic interactionists were incorporated into contemporary social theories, but even this theoretical tradition never advanced beyond a small corner of sociology.

In the wake of the social changes brought about during the 1960s, a new generation of social theories appeared on the scene. Some had an explicit desire to connect to social movements of the times (e.g., neo-Marxism, feminism), while others sought to build upon, in different ways, aspects of the classical and midcentury traditions to develop new insights about the relationship between individuals and society, the nature of social order, and the conditions of social change. In this section we can only provide a brief sampling of some of the most important of these theories, but we hope to indicate some of the main strands of contemporary social theory in all its diversity.

The Revival of Marxism

The older theoretical tradition of Marxism underwent a significant revival in the 1960s and afterward. This new generation of Marxist social theorists—(or neo-Marxists, as they came to be known)—sought to update Marxism for the late twentieth century, taking into account the fact that history had not—at least up until then—worked out the way Marx and Engels had predicted it would. One central focus of neo-Marxist social theory was to expand upon Marx’s original idea of the capitalist state (that is, the governing institutions of a capitalist society). Neo-Marxists argued that the capitalist state could, and indeed often had, forced powerful economic classes to make “concessions” to the working class (thereby improving the living standards of all citizens). For example, “the state” could establish social programs like pensions for the elderly (what is known as Social Security in the United States), unemployment insurance, health insurance, and free or low-cost public education. The establishment of these programs dramatically improved
21-30  CHAPTER 21  Social Theory

the lives of ordinary people over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even (at least according to neo-Marxists) helping to save capitalism from its own worst tendencies. The benefits these programs provided were seen by neo-Marxists as key to persuading the working class that it did not need socialism (Poulantzas 1978). At the same time, however, neo-Marxists insisted that such concessions could not go on forever; at some point, their costs would become too great for capitalist economies or governments to bear. This “fiscal crisis” would ultimately open the door to the possibility of a new kind of socialist revolution (or at least make it one possible outcome among other alternatives) (O’Connor 1973).

In addition to rethinking the classical Marxist theory of the state, neo-Marxist scholars also developed a much more elaborate understanding of the nature of social classes and the class structure within capitalist societies. Marx’s two-class model—a dominant and a large subordinate class—clearly did not fit modern capitalist societies very well. By the middle of the twentieth century, it was obvious that the growth of a large middle class made up of professionals (such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers) and business managers (who worked for large companies but did not own them) bore little resemblance to the classical proletariat that Marx envisioned. The “embarrassment of the middle classes,” as neo-Marxist theorist Erik Olin Wright (1985) put it, required a new body of theory about how modern societies are divided. Wright’s effort to solve this problem argued that just as the ownership of a business is an “asset” that can be used to generate greater economic rewards (for example, when you hire people to work for you), so too are credentials (like a law degree) and supervisory positions (in an organization) (Wright 1985, 1997). Possession of any of these assets, Wright argued, would generate surplus incomes compared to similar people who did not have those same assets.

Neo-Marxist social theorists working on questions of political economy were also among the first to revive the study of capitalism as a global economic order. The work of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 2011 on what he calls the capitalist world system represents one widely-debated example. For Wallerstein, capitalism is not an economic system that exists just within countries but crucially also in the economic relationships between countries (where rich countries are able to exploit poor countries, just as rich capitalists can be seen as exploiting workers).

Wallerstein and other neo-Marxists anticipated the rise of globalization—the increasing flows of goods and services across national borders—long before social scientists in other theoretical traditions began to pay attention to an increasingly global world. Neo-Marxists have also highlighted what they saw as the inherently unstable features of global capitalism, particularly in the financial sector (Brenner 2006). The banking crisis of 2007–2008, which would eventually require an enormous financial bailout by governments in the United States and elsewhere, is consistent with neo-Marxist predictions. But here again, like Marx before them, neo-Marxists may have underestimated the capacity of capitalism to save itself from its own problems (at least so far!).

**Feminist Social Theory**

One important limitation of neo-Marxism was that its focus on class relations and class power tended to downplay other types of inequalities. Just as Weber and Du Bois made important contributions to sociology by emphasizing the importance of status-group conflicts and racism, so too would a new generation of social theorists respond to the Marxist revival by seeking to invigorate sociology’s understanding of these issues.
of inequalities beyond class. One such alternative was the emergence of feminist social theory. To be sure, sociologists have long been concerned about issues relating to gender (for example, in research on the family), but it was not until the 1970s with the rise of a distinctly feminist social theory—which placed gender and gender inequality at the center of its theoretical lens, challenging many of the presuppositions of classical social theory for its male-centered biases—that the full implications of gender inequality for how sociologists theorize about society began to become clear. An early and influential thinker in the development of feminist social theory was the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). While Beauvoir wrote on a range of issues, from ethics and philosophy to politics, it was her work on sex and gender that made the most direct contributions to social theory. In her classic book, *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 1952), she offers an analysis of what has come to be known as *patriarchy*—the idea that societies are set up to ensure that women are systematically controlled (and devalued). For Beauvoir, women were not born to be subordinate, but they are made to seem different and distinct from, and inferior to, men. In Beauvoir’s own words, “One is not born but becomes a woman.” This idea was central to the distinction that later feminists would make between sex (a biological characteristic) and gender (the social meanings ascribed to being a “man” or a “woman”). Beauvoir was thus one of the first theorists to insist that gender and femininity are social constructions—that is, that societies create gender categories and these differences typically are translated into inequalities.

Contemporary feminist theory emerged in the 1970s, and it would build upon Beauvoir’s early insights in a variety of ways. Feminist theorists share a commitment to understanding how and why the social world is designed as it is for men and women, although feminist theory has diverged in many ways. It is possible, however, to discern three key approaches to social theory. The first approach arose as early feminist scholars began to see the social world from the perspective of women, leading them to theorize sex differences, or the different ways the world worked for men and women. These early works often began by making the point that most social theories had ignored women and were thus based on male realms of experience. Therefore, feminist social theorists set out to include women as the subjects of theoretical analysis. The result was often quite transformative. For instance, the sociologist Dorothy Smith (b. 1926) showed how the basis of sociology changed when women were put at the center of the analysis: A women’s perspective reveals how social science historically had systematically neglected important aspects of the experiences of women because of its male-centered bias (Smith 1974). Echoing this, other feminist theorists analyzed how sociological inquiry would have to change if it took women seriously: from rethinking its notions of the individual to expanding its areas of inquiry to include the private sphere (such as the role of power in families).

These early feminist theorists searched for the cause of gender inequality. Far too often, though, this made their theories seem somewhat simplified—as if gender inequality comes from some a single fixed aspect of societies or individuals (or the relationships between individuals). Similarly, they frequently lumped all women together, ignoring critical differences among them. In the process, they tended to highlight issues of concern to privileged women—like the social isolation of middle-class housewives or the exclusion of some women from paid labor. But these were not the concerns of all women. Later feminist theorists have paid special attention to the ways in which gender is experienced differently by different women.

From these critiques a second feminist approach to theory emerged, one that shifted from explaining sexual inequality in general to making the very existence of gender something that needed to be examined and challenged. This feminist approach explores how the categories of male and female emerge
and shape social life. For instance, feminists have explored gender dynamics in different institutions (e.g., families, schools, workplaces, churches). Others have looked at how gender "gets performed" in these social settings. So while sociologists of gender might study the division of labor in the family or at work, theorists of gender might seek to explain why work is divided up in gendered ways across different public and private arenas—and why we interact the way we do as women and men (Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Even more recently, feminist theorists have moved away from looking at gender on its own to considering it alongside other social hierarchies. This third type of feminist theory allows for social life to be understood in more fluid, interconnected, and variable terms. Here the emphasis is on how relationships between men and women are formed in relation to multiple types of social inequalities—such as race, class, sexuality, and religion. The social world is stratified in all these ways. So when gender is constructed or performed, it is done so along with these other categories. For example, the implications of gender inequality in families are very different for upper-middle-class women who can afford high-quality childcare for their children and maids to clean their houses than for poor women who have far fewer such choices. This theoretical approach thus highlights the interlocking nature of inequality, or what has come to be known as intersectionality: a focus on the linkages among disadvantaged groups. The key innovation is to look at the way inequalities are experienced together. The experience of gender, in other words, is different for poor or rich women, white or minority women, and so forth (Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2005; Choo and Ferree 2010).

Michel Foucault and the Problem of Power

The French social theorist Michel Foucault’s (1926–1984) contributions to social theory are unique and controversial. Foucault did not fit into any of the usual disciplinary boundaries: He was a philosopher and an intellectual historian, although his writings had many implications for social theory. His central concern, across many books on institutions such as prisons and asylums, the history of madness, and a multi-volume study on the history of sexuality, was with the pervasive and subtle forms of power—what it is and how it operates in society. In contrast to the standard way of thinking about power in a hierarchical, top-down process, that is, as something that some people have (e.g., those in the government or military, the ruling class, the authority figures in important institutions) and others do not (e.g., the working class, the poor, minorities), Foucault says that power is everywhere, operating in hidden as well as open forms.

Foucault was particularly interested in the role of “discipline” across societies: both how we try to discipline ourselves and how others (and institutions) try to discipline us. Foucault was interested in the ways in which institutions such as schools, prisons, mental institutions, sports teams, and others train (or retrain) individuals to conform in certain ways (including not just their minds but also their bodies). Higher education provides a good example, especially at the highest levels. When we go to law school, or medical school, or seek a PhD in economics or physics or comparative literature, we are training our minds to be disciplined, to think within the parameters of a particular hierarchy.
way of understanding the world. But this training may also limit our freedom and creativity; we become trapped, Foucault thought, by the existing way of understanding.

Foucault famously suggested in his book *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977) that we live in a “disciplinary society,” using imagery from a proposed model prison designed by social philosopher Jeremy Bentham, called the Panopticon. Placed at the center of the prison, the Panopticon is a visual tower that allows for continuous surveillance of all the inmates, with the goal of “inducing in the inmates a state of permanent and conscious visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” Foucault argued that whole societies are constructed in similar ways. He argued we are all subjected to a disciplining power that we can’t see but that is all around us.

In modern society, then, Foucault believed that discipline is both a major characteristic and a function of power. However, just as power should not be thought of as something imposed on us from above, Foucault argues that everyone disciplines everyone else—from friends who make fun of each other for acting in particular ways to even the ways in which we discipline our own behaviors by internalizing norms in society. Almost everyone in America these days seems to either be on a diet or think they should be on a diet or lose weight, or fears that if they do not discipline their eating habits they will gain weight. When we come to feel guilty about certain things and monitor our own behavior, as most of us do with respect to food, we are doing something that Foucault says is the hallmark of modern power: We become our own police agents, policing our own behaviors.

Foucault also wrote widely about the social importance of discourse—what we talk or write about in attempting to understand the world around us, and the words and concepts we use to judge things. Foucault argued that the ways in which people talk about the world shape how we envision acting in the world. For example, in his work on the history of sexuality, Foucault was concerned with how we talk about sexuality, as well as the practices and institutions that exist around it—from actual sexual intercourse, to ideas about when the right age to have sex is, to what it means to be promiscuous or prudish, to sex education classes in school, to online dating networks, sex clubs, norms about contraceptive use, and so on.

Why was Foucault so concerned about discourse? The discourse regarding someone or something essentially defines the parameters for how we can talk about and understand it. Consider something like democracy. What do we talk about when we talk about democracy? What do we take into consideration, and what is not part of the conversation? For example, while we tend to consider the equal right to vote (“one person, one vote”) as a key feature of democracy, we do not consider economic equality to be as important a factor (even though we know that rich people can give money to support candidates and parties, which can influence the outcomes of election.) But beyond the actual content of what is discussed, a second important element in understanding a discourse is considering what counts as legitimate or accepted knowledge and who gets to be defined as “experts.” For example, in the discourse around intelligence, what defines intelligence, and who gets to decide? Here we can think of the importance of school teachers and standardized tests, all of which (including practices such as taking exams and evaluating students) are part of the discourse on intelligence. When we say someone is intelligent, we usually mean that she has the kinds of intellectual skills and abilities that are rewarded in schools and professions. But why aren’t other kinds of intelligence—for example, emotional intelligence or mechanical ability—usually considered when we talk about intelligence?

### Analytical Sociology

In recent years, the impulse to develop broad, general theories of society has unquestionably declined. Fewer and fewer sociologists and social theorists today believe that a theory of entire societies is desirable, or indeed even possible. But this does not mean the end of social theory. Quite the opposite! Rich theoretical work on more narrow aspects of society is very much in progress and open for further development. This conclusion has led an emerging group of sociologists and social theorists to revive what is known as middle-range theories—or theories that make specific, searchable propositions about particular aspects of society—as the best approach to developing social theory. Under the loose umbrella of analytical sociology, these sociologists and social theorists have argued that the problem with many existing approaches in contemporary social theory is that they fail to pay adequate attention to the ways in which individual actions and motivations provide the foundation for how societies operate and how they change. At the center of analytical sociology is the idea that sociologists must study the relationship between the “macro” aspects of societies (e.g., institutions, organizations, the economy) and the “micro” aspects of how and why individuals make the choices that they do. Analytical sociologists define their approach to linking the micro and the macro as structural individualism, a theory that starts from the proposition that societies rest on the choices and action that individuals make, individually and together, even though these choices and the actions that follow from them are always constrained by society as a whole.

Robert Merton (1910–2002) and James Coleman (1926–1995) are regarded as founding figures of analytical sociology (Hedstrom and Udehn 2009). Merton was an American sociologist who argued that social structure constraints individual behavior and...
sociologist, born into a poor family in Philadelphia, who attended Harvard on scholarship where Talcott Parsons was one of his teachers. But despite his pedigree, Merton largely rejected the ambitions of structural functionalism to provide a general theory of society. Instead, in a series of essays and books over a 50-year career, Merton strove to build a different kind of theory, what he called middle-range theory (Merton 1957). Merton invented some of the most famous concepts in all of sociology: for example, the self-fulfilling prophecy (the idea that if you start to think or predict something will happen, it becomes more likely to actually happen than if you had not); and the unanticipated consequences of social action (the idea that the outcomes of any action we undertake may well be unanticipated, as for example when we get a dog for companionship but soon make new human friends who take their dogs for exercise at the same park we do). Merton was a much-admired sociologist during his career, and his insights have gained in importance in recent years as a new generation of sociologists has sought to elaborate on some of his central ideas.

In his influential writings on middle-range theory, Merton argued that theories should neither be aimed at such a high level of generality that they leave out important details (as examples, he specifically pointed to Marx’s theory of history based on class struggle and Parsons’ structural functionalist theory of societies), nor should they be so specific to a particular situation that they have no general implications. For example, I may have a theory about why one park in my neighborhood is popular with families while another is a popular place to sell drugs, but that theory will not tell much else about parks, drugs, or communities outside my neighborhood. The middle-range stands between the two, looking for the general in specific contexts, and always based in part on the actions of individuals. What does this mean in practice? For Talcott Parsons, norms about appropriate behavior (the basic, unstated rules of society that we must master in order to “fit in”) can be explained in terms of the functions they play in society. For example, the ritual of shaking hands with your opponent after a sporting match shows respect for your opponent, acknowledges success (or admits defeat), and signifies after the conflict of the match that you and your opponent are now no longer enemies. But just noting that these are the functions of the norm of hand-shaking after a competition does not explain where the norm came from in the first place. Some athletes somewhere had to begin to feel it was worthwhile to take the trouble to shake hands with their opponent, and that practice had to resonate with other athletes, and so forth. In other words, it is not enough to say that hand-shaking in this way makes a (minor) contribution to social order; we need also to understand why individual athletes thought it valuable and were motivated to start doing it even before it became a norm not to shake your opponent’s hand. James Coleman’s contributions to analytical sociology grow out of these kinds of questions. Coleman spent much of his career developing mathematical models of social life applying insights from economics about how individuals are motivated, and act, on what they take to be their interests and goals. Coleman’s greatest work, The Foundations of Social Theory (Coleman 1990), is a nearly 1,000-page treatise that argues for the importance of requiring micro (or individual) explanations in any sociological research project. To exemplify what he means, Coleman opens his book with an example of how an individual-level explanation works using Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber’s famous thesis—that capitalism developed in countries and regions where Protestantism was strongest—can be simply diagrammed as

Strength of Protestantism → Early Capitalist Development.

This implies that all we need to know is where Protestantism was strong, capitalism developed earlier. But
Coleman argues that what Weber actually did, and what makes *The Protestant Ethic* such a great book, is something much more than this, as displayed in Figure 21.4 (based on Coleman 1990). Versions of this diagram have been called the “Coleman Boat” (or sometimes the “Coleman Bathtub”). The logic of the diagram is that for a theory like Weber’s to work, it has to be able to specify how the macro (in this case, the rise of Protestantism) influenced the micro (in this case, the values and behaviors of individuals) to produce a new macro outcome (the rise of capitalism). It was precisely because Weber was able to make a plausible argument about why individual Protestants were more likely to invest in businesses and work long hours than others that the argument is viable.

Analytical sociologists insist that we build social theories at least partially from the ground up, while always paying attention to individuals. In this focus, they share certain impulses with some of the theorists we have discussed up to this point: for example, with the symbolic interactionists and their focus on the importance of individuals’ interactions with others. But they go beyond these earlier theorists in various ways. Perhaps most importantly, analytical sociology has made considerable effort to absorb and import ideas from the discipline of psychology to understand how and why individuals think and act the way they do. Importing ideas about how the mind works in social situations is one of the hallmarks of analytical sociology. But analytical sociologists do not stop there. There are always two sides to the relationship: individuals and their motivations and behaviors, and social structures which impose limits on the choices individuals can make. Most importantly, this is a dynamic relationship (one informs the other in an endless cycle).

How does this dynamic cycle work? Analytical sociologists are keen to identify the key mechanisms (i.e., the processes in which one thing causes something else) that make the connection between individuals and social structures. In the words of two of the leading analytical sociologists, these mechanisms are the “cogs and wheels” of social life (Bearman and Hedstrom 2009). Some of the most important of these mechanisms are (1) emotions, (2) beliefs and preferences (what people believe to be true, and what they want or desire), (3) opportunities (in every social setting there are opportunities of one kind or another available, but often these are unknown to individuals without the right source of information); (4) signals (information about the consequences of a course of action given from one person or group to another), (5) trust (how much individuals or groups are willing to trust other individuals or groups), and (6) norms. Each of these mechanisms has a critical societal component behind it. We’ve already discussed norms in which by often hidden or unstated rules societies give individuals strong positive or negative incentives to abide by them (see Elster 2009 for elaboration). For another example, consider the importance of trust. Social life would be hard without some ability to trust other people (and indeed, where trust breaks down, life becomes much harder!). But trusting strangers is continually put to the test whenever buyers and sellers interact in economic markets. Trust may arise because the buyer and seller have known each other for a long time, but a macro component (such as a legal system that will punish a fraudulent seller) makes trusting strangers easier. Imagine the alternative, where every buyer who feels ripped off has to “take the law in her own hands”!

One of the most important sources of social change occurs through social networks. A social network, as we noted in our discussion of Georg Simmel, consists of the relationship ties between individuals, in which one individual is connected to a number of other people, and these people, in turn, are each connected to other people, some of whom the first person undoubtedly will not know (see Figure 21.3). Analytical sociologists have shown that social networks are important for many reasons; we often find educational or employment opportunities, lovers, and new ideas through our social networks. Networks also provide the backbone of not-so-beneficial dynamics: for example, transmittable diseases flow through networks. The basic idea of social networks has in recent years become popularized through social media, and “networking” is now widely understood as an important strategy for building a career. Indeed, one of the most important but hidden benefits of going to college is that you will make friends and acquaintances who will later become part of your social network!

Analytical sociology is very much in the process of development, and full assessment of its theoretical insights must await further developments and application. One of

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### Figure 21.4 Coleman’s “Boat” Applied to Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of people who are Protestant in a country or region</th>
<th>Individuals’ values and beliefs based on Protestantism</th>
<th>Economic activity undertaken by individuals influenced by Protestantism</th>
<th>Rise of capitalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Source:** Based on Coleman 1990.
the most important questions that analytical sociologists have yet to take up in a serious way are the implications of their emphasis on individual actions in relation to the classical sociological ideas about class, power, the state, and globalization. In other words, the micro side of social life (the factors that motivate individual beliefs and action) has been far better worked out than the link upward to the macro aspects of societies. In this way, the challenge of constructing adequate social theories that can provide suitable ways of connecting individuals and societies remains to be solved.

**CONCLUSION SOCIAL THEORY AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**

In this chapter, we have surveyed a wide range of social theories beginning with the late-nineteenth-century works of Marx and Durkheim, all the way through to some of the leading contemporary social theories and theoretical schools. We started from three central themes that have motivated social theorists over the past 150 years: (1) What is the nature of the individual (who are we?), and how do individuals act in the context of society? (2) What is the basis for social order? (3) What are the conditions under which societies change? We can now see that there is no single approach that can answer these questions once and for all. This might be viewed as a source of frustration—who wouldn’t want to just “know” the answer to these questions?—but it can also be a source of fruitful thought and puzzle. Put another way, the fact that individuals, societies, and social change appear differently depending on which theoretical lens you put on underscores the endless complexity of the social world.

Does this mean that we cannot choose among theories? How is it that someone—say a young sociologist—decides that one theory is better than another? In order to answer that question, it is important to understand that the history of social theory is different than in some other disciplines, especially those in the natural sciences, where “old” theories are discarded as “new” theories arise. Instead, as we have seen, older, classical theoretical ideas continue to inform the development of new social theories. As a result, there has been a steady accumulation of more and more theory over time, as new theories pile on top of old ones. What is a new student to do?

One way of approaching this to think about the ways that each of the major theories we have described in this chapter approaches answers to the three central questions. Here there are clearly important differences. Karl Marx wanted above all else to understand the conditions of social change, how societies evolve from one economic system to another, and under what conditions capitalism might be abolished in favor of a more egalitarian world. Max Weber asked how and why modern societies are increasingly organized around bureaucratic rules and laws, and whether that might be problematic. Talcott Parsons wanted to theorize why societies have recurrent patterns that are so similar over time, in particular why order trumps change, and why there is so little conflict most of the time. Symbolic interactionists focused attention on the micro aspects of the social world—individual interactions with objects and other individuals—as a way of building theories from the ground up (this latter impulse is shared by rational choice and network theories). Feminists argued that we must examine all of the ways in which gender is produced and male domination persists. Michel Foucault argues power is everywhere and that we must think about how physical bodies absorb social influences. Analytical sociology returns us to the classical problem of how individuals and society interact with one another.

These different starting points nevertheless still leave a couple of possibilities for choosing among social theories. On the one hand, it may be that different theories can be useful depending on what questions we are focused on. In this way, we can think of different social theories as akin to different kinds of maps. Consider the differences in Google Maps between the “map view,” the “earth view,” and the “satellite view.” Each provides a different way of looking at a single address or location. The same analogy works for old-fashioned printed maps: We use one kind of map to help navigate the streets of one city or in driving from one
place to another, a different kind of map when hiking in the mountains, and a globe when trying to locate an unfamiliar country. Each kind of map provides useful orientation for some things but not others.

But theories do often engage directly with one another and cannot all be equally valid for every question we ask. We have tried to point out some of the shortcomings of various theories in this chapter. In these situations, where two theories are completely incompatible on some key point of interest, a sociologist must think about how to weigh their relative merits and shortcomings. Some possible questions in such comparisons could be as follows: Which theory is more consistent with what we believe we know, or to put it another way, “the facts”? Which theory helps us ask more interesting or important questions? Which theory fits better with our own political views (or perhaps even better, which forces us to challenge those views)? Or it may turn out that the best way to make use of different theories is to synthesize them, taking ideas from different theorists and seeing how they do (or don’t) fit together.

However we come to choose the theory or theories we study or identify with most closely, all of the major social theories we have explored in this chapter provide insights into the social world and its constituent parts. And social theories are very much part of the sociological imagination: Understanding how and why social theorists have puzzled over the questions they have underscores why sociology exists in the first place. As social theory continues to evolve and develop early in the twenty-first century, we can be sure that new theoretical traditions (or revivals of older traditions) will appear to further challenge the sociological imagination.
The Big Questions Revisited

1 What Is Social Theory? (p. 21-6)

Social theories enable us to see the social world in different ways. In this section, we identified three common themes that all of the major sociological theories have sought to address.

SEENING THE SOCIAL WORLD THROUGH SOCIAL THEORY (p. 21-6)

• What three common themes have all of the major sociological theories sought to address?

2 How Did the Early Social Theorists Make Sense of the World? (p. 21-7)

The foundations of modern sociology, and social theory as we know it today, can be traced to the writings of a handful of key thinkers working in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. In this section, we introduced you to Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and W. E. B. Du Bois.

CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES (p. 21-7)

Karl Marx (1818–1883) (p. 21-9)

• Why did Marx think that societies were so heavily shaped by their economic systems?

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) (p. 21-11)

• According to Durkheim, what social forces regulate behavior so that we may live together?

Max Weber (1864–1920) (p. 21-15)

• How did Weber explain the principles or motivations behind social action?

• What is the distinction between power and authority, according to Weber?

• How does social closure explain how some status groups seek to gain advantage over others?

KEY TERMS

modes of production (p. 21-9)
ancient societies (p. 21-9)
feudalism (p. 21-9)
capitalism (p. 21-9)
socialist (modes of production) (p. 21-9)
communist (modes of production) (p. 21-9)
forces of production (p. 21-9)
social relations of production (p. 21-10)
bourgeoisie (p. 21-10)
capital (p. 21-10)
proletariat (p. 21-10)
serfs (p. 21-10)
welfare states (p. 21-11)
social facts (p. 21-12)
social forces (p. 21-12)
socialization (p. 21-12)
norms (p. 21-12)
social solidarity (p. 21-13)
mechanical solidarity (p. 21-13)
Georg Simmel (1858–1918) (p. 21-18)
• How do Simmel’s insights on social circles and social distance help us understand how individuals and groups relate to one another?

W. E. B. Du Bois (1869–1961) (p. 21-20)
• According to Du Bois, what are the diverse ways in which racism influences the lives of African Americans
• Why did Du Bois argue that black Americans experience a “double consciousness”?

After World War II, the interests of social theorists began to shift in new and unexpected directions, and leadership in the development of social theory and sociology as a whole passed from being primarily located in Europe to America. In this section, we explored the new directions in social theory that were embodied by functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOCIAL THEORY, 1937–1965 (P. 21-24)

Structural Functionalism (p. 21-24)
• According to structural functionalism, what roles do norms, values, and institutions play in society?

Conflict Theory (p. 21-25)
• How did conflict theory attempt to explain social inequalities?

Symbolic Interactionism (p. 21-27)
• How are symbols key features of the social world?
• In what ways, according to Erving Goffman, is “all the world a stage”?

3 What Innovations in Social Theory Emerged in the Mid-Twentieth Century? (p. 21-24)

KEY TERMS
structural functionalism (p. 21-24)
values (p. 21-24)
institutions (p. 21-24)
roles (p. 21-24)
conflict theory (p. 21-26)
social welfare (p. 21-26)
symbolic interactionism (p. 21-27)
significant others (p. 21-28)
generalized other (p. 21-28)
How Has a New Generation of Social Theory Evolved? (p. 21-29)

This last section provided a brief sampling of some important new theories that have evolved since the 1960s and examined an emerging theory known as analytical sociology.

SOCIAL THEORY SINCE THE TURBULENT 1960s (p. 21-29)

The Revival of Marxism (p. 21-29)
- How did neo-Marxists expand upon Marx’s ideas about the capitalist state, the relations between economic classes under capitalism, and globalization?

Feminist Social Theory (p. 21-30)
- What do sociologists mean by intersectionality when it comes to inequality?

Michael Foucault and the Problem of Power (p. 21-32)
- How did Foucault view power?

Analytical Sociology (p. 21-33)
- What do analytical sociologists mean by structural individualism?

KEY TERMS
- capitalist state
- classes
- capitalist world system
- globalization
- feminist social theory
- patriarchy
- sex
- gender
- social construction (of gender)
- intersectionality
- discourse
- middle-range theories
- analytical sociology
- structural individualism
- self-fulfilling prophecy
- unanticipated consequences of social action
- mechanisms
- signals
- trust
analytical sociology An approach to social theory and research that centers on "middle-range" questions and seeks to uncover the processes, or mechanisms, through which individuals are influenced by social forces.

ancient societies Settled communities before the advent of large-scale farming. The most famous of the ancient societies were Athens and Rome.

apartheid A system of racial segregation in South Africa, which was explicitly adopted in 1948 and ended in the early 1990s. All citizens were classified into racial groups, and were explicitly segregated on the basis of these categories, as were education, medical care, and public facilities.

authority The ability to compel others to do things without needing to resort to threats. For Max Weber, authority requires legitimacy, that is, individuals grant authority to those they believe have a legitimate right to rule.

bourgeoisie The group in a capitalist economy who owns businesses and employs people to work for them. This term is used in the Marxist tradition to refer to the most powerful class in a capitalist society.

bureaucracy A type of organization that has rules and responsibilities for each position (or job) spelled out, and in a fully modern bureaucracy, which selection into those positions occurs on the basis of merit (not typically by election or inheritance). Many bureaucracies are also responsible for setting out policies and procedures that are to be adhered to by others.

capital A resource that can be used to make investments. Economic capital refers to the possession of financial assets that can be invested in a business. Other types of capital have also been suggested, for example, human capital (the skills, education, or knowledge an individual possesses, which can be used to earn higher income); and cultural capital (the cultural knowledge possessed by an individual which impacts an individual's capacity to speak and interact with others in a sophisticated way).

capitalism An economic system organized around private property and market exchange. In a capitalist economy, goods that are produced for consumption are distributed via exchange on the market.

capitalist state The governing institutions and legal system in a capitalist society.

capitalist world system A concept invented by Immanuel Wallstein to describe the ways in which capitalist economies are linked in a global system, in which rich, developed countries are able to exploit undeveloped countries through a global division of labor in which poor countries provide raw materials and lower-skill labor.

charismatic authority A type of leadership that arises from the individual characteristics of a leader, in particular the widespread belief that the leader has special gifts or abilities.

class The sociological concept that refers to a group of people who share a similar social and economic position in society.

collective consciousness According to Emile Durkheim, universally shared beliefs that bind a society together. This was typical, Durkheim argued, of primitive societies.

communist (modes of production): A type of society, envisioned by Karl Marx as something that might become possible in the distant future, in which the abundance of material goods would mean that no one would be compelled to work, and maximum freedoms would be provided to everyone.

conflict theory A type of social theory that emerged out of dissatisfaction with structural functionalism, and held that all societies are characterized by conflicts that arise from the uneven distribution of power and wealth between groups.

discourse What we talk or write about in attempting to understand the world around us, and the words and concepts we use to judge things.

division of labor The specialization of individuals in any organization or group, or in society as a whole, particularly in relation to work. There is thus a division of labor in all of society (with different people working in different occupations), a division of labor in individual organizations (where different people perform different tasks) and a division of labor in individual families and communities.

feminist social theory Social theories which place gender relations and male domination at the center of their conceptualization of societies.

feudalism A social order in which those who own land (landlords) are entitled to receive the products of the laborers (serfs) who are legally obligated to work for the landowner.

forces of production One part of the modes of production; the technological and productive capacity of any society at a given point in time.

gender The ways that social forces create differences between men's and women's behavior, preferences, treatment, and opportunities, and the characteristics of men and women that reflect these forces.

generalized other The social control exercised by commonsense understandings of what is appropriate given a specific time and place.

globalization The growing permeability of national borders and the increase in flows of goods, services, and people across national borders.

institution A complex term used to stand for structured and enduring practices of human life that are built around well-established rules and norms or are centered in important organizations like the government, legal courts, churches, schools, or the military.

interpretative sociology The study of the meanings individuals ascribe to their actions.

intersectionality Forms of inequality that overlap and potentially reinforce one another. One's class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, or other characteristics may create multiple forms of disadvantage that inequality researchers should consider.

legal–rational authority A type of authority found in the modern world that rests on the establishment of transparent legal and bureaucratic rules. Legal-rational authority is most legitimate when the rules are clear, applied to everyone, and are justifiable because they appear to be the most efficient way to do things.

legitimacy The acceptance of the authority of a ruler and/or system of government. Legitimacy exists when virtually all members of society accept the right of their rulers to govern their society.

mechanical solidarity According to Emile Durkheim, mechanical solidarity refers to the factors that primitive societies together,
mostly through family and kinship ties, and a collective consciousness shared by all members of the community.

**mechanisms** The specific factor or factors that cause something to happen or produce some outcome.

**middle-range theories** Theories that make specific, researchable propositions about particular aspects of society. Middle-range theories can be contrasted with broader or grand theories of society as a whole.

**modes of production** In Marxist theory, a mode of production is a concept for characterizing the dominant economic system in a society. A mode of production has two parts: the forces of production and the social relations of production.

**network analysis** A research technique that focuses on identifying the connections between individuals, groups, or organizations.

**norm** A basic rule of society that helps us know what is and is not appropriate to do in a situation. Norms evolve over time as social attitudes and expectations change, although those changes are typically very slow.

**organic solidarity** According to Emile Durkheim, as societies become more advanced, they are held together through mutual dependence and interdependence individuals have with one another.

**patriarchy** A gender system in which men have substantially more power than women in politics, the economy, and the family.

**power** Power has three distinct dimensions in the sociological sense: (1) the power of an individual or group to get another individual or group to do something it wants, which sometimes may involve force; (2) the power to control the agenda of issues that are to be decided; and finally (3) the power to persuade others that their interests are the same as those of a powerholder. Power can be possessed by individuals or groups.

**profane** Those objects or social practices which have no religious significance.

**proletariat** Individuals in capitalist economies who work in exchange for pay. The term is usually reserved for people performing manual jobs and is synonymous with “working class.”

**racism** The assumption that members of a racial group are inherently inferior to other races.

**role** A position within an institution or organization that comes with specific social expectations for how to behave and be treated. Some roles may be ascribed, that is assigned to us by birth (man, woman, white, black), and some may be achieved, that is acquired through our actions (doctor, professor, class clown).

**sacred** Holy; worthy of special reverence.

**self-fulfilling prophecy** A term coined by Robert Merton to mean the process by which someone is defined in a particular way and then comes to fulfill the expectations of that definition.

**serf** Under feudalism, a person who is legally obligated to work for the landowner.

**sex** Whether a person is classified as male or female based on anatomical or chromosomal criteria.

**sex differences** Differences that are assumed to exist because of anatomical or chromosomal criteria.

**signals** Information about the consequences of a course of action given from one person or group to another.

**significant other** A term coined by George Herbert Mead to mean individuals close enough to us to have a strong capacity to motivate our behavior.

**social closure** The process by which organized groups seek to establish or maintain privileged access to rewards or opportunities.

**social construction (of race or gender)** The social processes that create and sustain racial or gender differences and gender inequalities.

**social distance** A concept first introduced by Georg Simmel to describe how close or intimate, or apart, any two individuals or groups are with each other.

**social facts** According to Emile Durkheim, those regularities and rules of everyday life that exist independently and outside the control of individuals.

**social forces** All of the forms of social structure (hierarchies and institutions) that any individual must operate within. Social forces are related to what Emile Durkheim called “social facts.”

**social networks** The ties or connections between people, groups, and organizations.

**social relations of production** One part of the modes of production; the relationships and inequalities between different kinds of people within the economy.

**social solidarity** The social forces that hold any society together.

**social theory** An overarching framework that suggests certain assumptions and assertions about the way the world works. These frameworks are used for posing research questions and evaluating evidence related to those questions.

**social welfare** Policies or programs, usually by governments, that are designed to provide enhanced well-being for everyone, although sometimes the term refers only to those programs that are aimed at the poorest members of society. An example of the former would be public health measures like insuring safe drinking water, while the latter might refer to “welfare” programs for the poor.

**socialist (modes of production)** In Marxist theory, a socialist mode of production is one in which ownership of the productive forces of society are collectively owned (not by individual business owners).

**socialization** The process by which individuals come to understand the expectations and norms of their groups as well as the various roles they transition into over the life course and how to behave in society or in particular social settings.

**status groups** A term invented by Max Weber to describe any group that forms a common identity and develops ways of distinguishing insiders from outsiders.

**stratification system** The full range of social hierarchies found in any society, which create inequalities between individuals and groups.

**structural functionalism** A theory of society in which individuals, groups, and the institutions of any society are guided by an overarching social system, and can be explained by the needs of society to reproduce itself.

**structural individualism** A theory that starts from the proposition that societies rest on the choices and action that individuals make, but in the context of the social forces that shape and constrain individual choice.
symbolic interactionism  A theory of the social world that focuses on the meanings that individuals give to objects and social practices, and how they use symbolic meanings in their interactions with one another.

traditional authority  Rule based on and justified by tradition.

trust  The degree to which individuals or groups are willing to rely on the assurances or assume the basic goodness of other individuals or groups.

unanticipated consequences of social action  The idea that the outcomes of any action we undertake may well be unanticipated, as for example when we get a dog for companionship but soon make new human friends who take their dogs for exercise at the same park we do.

value  A judgment about what is intrinsically important or meaningful. When it comes to research, values held by sociologists shape their views of and perspectives on the questions they ask.

welfare states  The bundle of programs that provide social insurance and social assistance for people falling into one or another category of attributes (such as old age, disability, or poverty). The most important types of welfare-state programs are old-age pensions (known in the United States as Social Security), health insurance programs, unemployment insurance, job training programs, and general welfare assistance for the very poor. Some analysts also include education in the mix of programs considered part of the welfare state.
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