

Chapter 1 Introduction



Source: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass by Lewis Carroll; illustration by John Tenniel. (1960) New York: Penguin. Used by permission.

Key Concepts

- [Theory](#)
- [Order](#)
 - [Collective/Individual](#)
- [Agency](#)
- [Action](#)
 - [Rational/Nonrational](#)
- [Enlightenment](#)
- [Civil society](#)
- [Industrial Revolution](#)
- [Division of labor](#)
- [Counter-Enlightenment](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865/1960:54)

In the passage above, the Pigeon had a theory: Alice is a serpent because she has a long neck and eats eggs. Alice, however, had a different theory: that she was a little

girl. Yet it was not the “facts” that were disputed in the above passage. Alice freely admitted that she had a long neck and ate eggs. So why did Alice and the Pigeon come to such different conclusions? Why didn’t the facts “speak for themselves”?

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

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

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

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

“Contemporary” sociological theory can be periodized roughly from 1935 to the present. However, the dividing line between “classical” and “contemporary” theory is not set in stone, and a few classical thinkers, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, wrote from the late 1800s right up until the 1960s! In identifying core contemporary

theorists, we consider the extent to which a writer extends and expands on the theoretical issues at the heart of sociology. To a person, these thinkers all talk back to, revise, and reformulate the ideas of the “founding” theorists of sociology while taking up important issues raised by the social context in which they were/are writing and by the human condition itself.

Yet the purpose of this book is to provide students not only with both core classical and contemporary sociological readings but also a framework for comprehending them. This metatheoretical framework will help students navigate, compare, and contrast the central ideas of each core figure, as well as contemplate *any* social issue within our own increasingly complex world. Before we introduce this metatheoretical framework, however, we need to clarify exactly what we mean by “theory.”

What Is Sociological Theory?

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

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

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

Thus, sociological theories share certain characteristics with theories developed in other branches of science. However, there are significant differences between social and other scientific theories (i.e., theories in the social sciences as opposed to those in the natural sciences) as well. First, sociological theories tend to be more evaluative and critical than theories in the natural sciences. Sociological theories are often rooted in implicit moral assumptions that contrast with traditional notions of scientific objectivity. In other words, it is often supposed that the pursuit of scientific knowledge should be free from value judgments or moral assessments; that is, that the first and foremost concern of science is to uncover what *is*, not what *ought* to be. Indeed, such objectivity is often cast as a defining feature of science, one that separates it from other forms of knowledge based on tradition, religion, or philosophy. But sociologists tend to be interested not only in understanding the workings of society but also in realizing a more just or equitable social order. As you will see, the work of many theorists is shaped in important respects by their own moral sensibilities regarding the condition of modern societies and what the

future may bring. Thus, sociological theorizing at times falls short of the “ideal” science practiced more closely (although still imperfectly) by “hard” sciences such as physics, biology, or chemistry. For some observers, this failure to conform consistently to the ideals of either science or philosophy is a primary reason for the discipline’s troublesome identity crisis and “ugly duckling” status within the academic world. For others, it represents the opportunity to develop a unique understanding of social life.

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

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

Why Read Original Works?

Some students—and professors—maintain that the original works of sociology’s founding figures are just too hard to decipher. Professors who hold this point of view use secondary textbooks that interpret and simplify the ideas of core theorists. Their argument is that you simply cannot capture students’ attention using original works; students must be engaged in order to understand, and secondary texts ultimately lead to a better grasp of the covered theories.

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

The problems that can arise from even the most faithfully produced interpretations can be illustrated by the telephone game. Recall that childhood game where you and your friends sit in a circle. One person thinks of a message and whispers it to the next person, who passes the message on to the next person, until the last person in the circle announces the message aloud. Usually, everyone roars with laughter because the message at the end typically is nothing like the one circulated at the beginning. This is because the message inadvertently is misinterpreted and changed as it goes around.

In the telephone game, the goal is to repeat exactly what has been said to you. Yet misinterpretations and modifications are commonplace. Consider now a secondary text, in which the goal is not to restate exactly what originally was written but to take the original source and make it “easier” to understand. Although this process of simplification perhaps allows you to understand the secondary text, you are at least one step removed from what the original author wrote.¹ At the same time, you have no way of knowing what was written in the original work. Moreover, when you start thinking and writing about the material presented in the secondary reading, you are not one but *two* steps removed from the original text. If the purpose of a course in classical sociological theory is to grapple with the ideas that preoccupied the core figures of the field—the ideas and analyses that would come to shape the direction of sociology for more than a century—then studying original works must be a cornerstone of the course.

¹ Further complicating the matter is that many of the original works that make up the core of sociological theory were written in a language other than English.

Language translation is itself an imperfect exercise.

To this end, we provide excerpts from the original writings of those we consider to be sociology's core classical theorists. If students are to understand Karl Marx's writings, they must read *Marx*, not a simplified interpretation of his ideas. They must learn to study for themselves what the initiators of sociology have said about some of the most fundamental social issues, the relevance of which is timeless.

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

Navigating Sociological Theory: The Questions of “Order” and “Action”

The theoretical framework that we use in this book revolves around two central questions that social theorists and philosophers have grappled with since well before the establishment of sociology as an institutionalized discipline: the questions of *order* and *action* (Alexander 1987). Indeed, these two questions have been a cornerstone in social thought at least since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers. The first question (illustrated in [Figure 1.1](#)) is that of **order**. It asks what accounts for the patterns or predictability of behavior that leads us to experience social life as routine. Or expressed somewhat differently, how do we explain the fact that social life is not random, chaotic, or disconnected but instead demonstrates the existence of an ordered social universe? The second question (illustrated in [Figure 1.2](#)) is that of **action**. It considers the factors that motivate individuals or groups to act. The question of action, then, turns our attention to the forces held to be responsible for steering individual or group behavior in a particular direction.

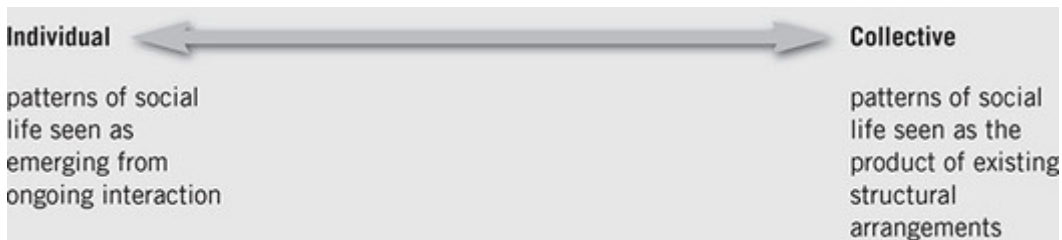


Figure 1.1 Basic Theoretical Continuum as to the Nature of Social Order

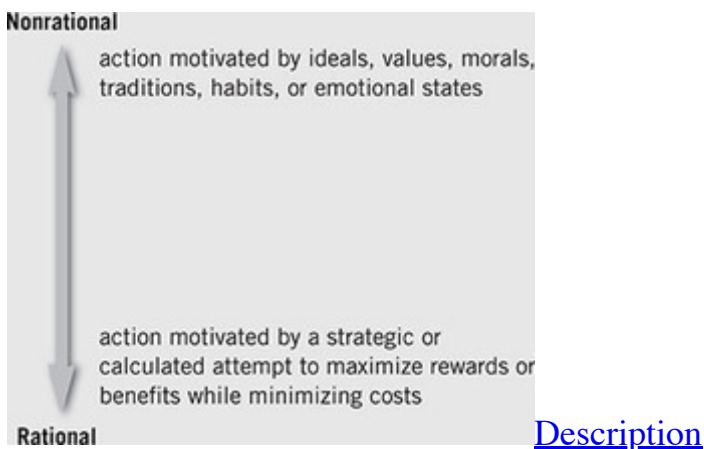


Figure 1.2 Basic Theoretical Continuum as to the Nature of Social Action

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

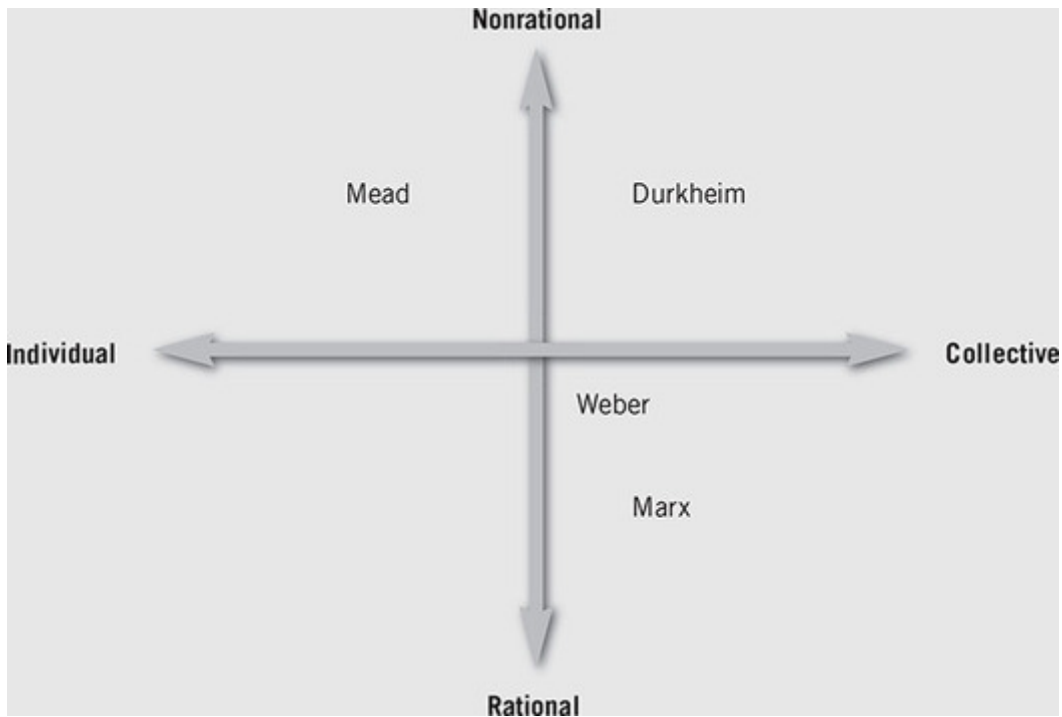
By contrast, the other answer to the question of order is that social order is a product of ongoing interactions between individuals and groups. Here, it is individuals and groups creating, re-creating, or altering the social order that works *up* to produce society. Put in another way, individualist approaches to order highlight [agency](#)—the individual’s capability to act or to intervene in his or her world. This position grants more autonomy to actors, because they are seen as relatively free to reproduce the patterns and routines of social life (i.e., the social order) or transform them. Over time, this orientation has earned several names as well—micro, elementarism, subjectivist, and the label we adopt here, [individual \(or individualist\)](#). (See [Figure 1.1](#).)

Turning to the question of action, we again find two answers, labeled here as [nonrational](#) and [rational](#).² Specifically, if the motivation for action is primarily nonrational, the individual takes his bearings from subjective ideals, symbolic codes, values, morals, norms, traditions, the quest for meaning, unconscious desires, or emotional states, or a combination of these. While the nonrationalist orientation is relatively broad in capturing a number of motivating forces, the rationalist orientation is far less encompassing. It contends that individual and group actions are motivated primarily by the attempt to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. Here, individuals and groups are viewed essentially as calculating and strategic as they seek to achieve the “selfish” goal of improving their positions. Actors are seen as taking their bearings from the external conditions in which they find themselves rather than from internal ideals.

² The terms “rational” and “nonrational” are problematic in that they have a commonsensical usage that is at odds with how theorists use these terms. By

“rational,” we do not mean “good and smart,” and by “nonrational,” we do not mean “irrational, nonsensical, or stupid” (Alexander 1987:11). Despite these problems, however, we continue to use the terms “rational” and “nonrational” because the semantic alternatives (“subjectivist,” “idealist,” “internal,” etc.) are problematic as well.

Intersecting the two questions and their answers, we can create a four-celled map on which we are able to plot the basic theoretical orientation of the social thinkers featured in this book. The four cells are identified as collective-nonrational, collective-rational, individual-nonrational, and individual-rational. For instance, as illustrated in [Figure 1.3](#), the German philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883), whose politico-economic critique of capitalism is one of the most influential theories in history, was interested above all in the collectivist and rationalist conditions behind and within order and action, while the French theorist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), especially in his later work, was most interested in the collectivist/nonrationalist realm. Durkheim sought to explain how oftentimes intangible social forces (such as moral codes) organize and order our world. Additionally, the German theorist Max Weber (1864–1920) offered a more multidimensional theory than either Marx or Durkheim by focusing on the *interpenetration* of structural forces (such as the capitalist economy and bureaucracy) and systems of meaning (such as religion). In contrast to Marx, Durkheim and Weber, who take a primarily collectivistic approach, the American social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) saw social order as continually emerging through the ongoing activities of individuals (individualistic) as they attempt to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves (nonrationalistic). By highlighting the social basis of thinking and communication, Mead challenged prevailing psychological theories about the mind (see [Figure 1.3](#)).



[Description](#)

Figure 1.3 Core Classical Theorists’ Basic Orientation

Note: This diagram reflects the basic theoretical orientation of a few core classical theorists: George Herbert Mead, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. However, each of these theorists—as well as every theorist in this volume—is far more nuanced and multidimensional than this simple figure lets on. The point is not to fix each theorist in a predetermined box, but rather to provide a means for illuminating and discussing each theorist’s orientation relative to one another and within their various works.

We cannot overemphasize, however, that these four coordinates are “ideal types”; theorists and theories are never “pure,” that is, situated completely in one cell. Implicitly or explicitly, or both, theorists inevitably incorporate more than one orientation in their work. These coordinates (or cells in the graph) are best understood as endpoints to a continuum on which theories typically occupy a position somewhere between the extremes. Multidimensionality and ambiguity are reflected in our maps by the lack of fixed points.

In addition, it is important to note that this map is something *you* apply to the theories under consideration. Although each theorist addresses the questions of order and action, the theorists generally did not use these terms in their writing. For that matter, their approaches to order and action tend to be implicit rather than explicit in their work. Thus, at times you will have to read between the lines to

determine a theorist's position on these fundamental questions. Although this may pose some challenges, it also expands your opportunities for learning.

Consequently, not everyone views each theorist in exactly the same light. Moreover, even within one major work, a theorist may draw from both ends of the continuum. In each chapter, we discuss the ambiguities and alternative interpretations within the body of work of each theorist. Nevertheless, these maps enable you to (1) recognize the general tendencies that exist within each theorist's body of work and (2) compare and contrast (and argue about) thinkers' general theoretical orientations. (For further examples as to the flexibility of this framework, see the discussion questions at the end of the chapter.)

Put another way, when navigating the forest of theory, individual theorists are like trees. Our analytic map is a tool or device for locating the trees within the forest so that you can enter and leave having developed a better sense of direction or, in this case, having learned far more than might otherwise have been the case. By enabling you to compare theorists' positions on two crucial issues, their work is likely to be seen less as a collection of separate, unrelated ideas. Bear in mind, however, that the map is only a tool. Its simplicity does not capture the complexities of the theories or of social life itself.

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

Consider this question: Why do people stop at red traffic lights? First, in terms of action, the answer to this question resides on a continuum, with rational and nonrational orientations serving as the endpoints. On the one hand, you might say people stop at red traffic lights because it is in their best interest to avoid getting a ticket or having an accident. This answer reflects a *rationalist* response; it demonstrates that rationalist motivations involve the individual taking her bearings from outside herself. The action (stopping at the red light) proceeds primarily in light of external conditions (e.g., a police officer who could ticket you, oncoming cars that could hit you).

A *nonrationalist* answer to this question is that people stop at red traffic lights because they believe it is good and right to follow the law. Here, the individual takes

his bearings from morals or values from within himself, rather than from external conditions (e.g., oncoming cars). Interestingly, if this moral or normative imperative is the only motivation for action, the individual will stop at the traffic light even if there is no police car or oncoming cars in sight. By contrast, if one's only motivation for action is rationalist, and there are absolutely no visible dangers (i.e., no police officers or other cars in sight and hence no possibility of getting a ticket or having an accident), the driver will *not* stop at the red light: instead, she will go.

Another *nonrationalist* answer to the question “Why do people stop at red traffic lights?” involves “habits.” By definition, habits are relatively unconscious: that is, we do not think about them. They come “automatically,” not from strategic calculations or external circumstances but from within; that is why they are typically considered *nonrational*. Interestingly, habits may or may not have their roots in morality. Some habits are “folkways,” or routinized ways people do things in a particular society (e.g., paying your bills by mail rather than in person, driving on the right side of the road), while other habits are attached to sacred values (e.g., putting your hand over your heart when you salute the flag). Getting back to our example, say you are driving in your car on a deserted road at 2:00 in the morning, and you automatically stop at a red traffic light out of habit. Your friend riding with you might say, “Why are you stopping? There’s not a car in sight.” If your action were motivated simply by habit and not a moral imperative to follow the law, you might say, “Hey, you’re right!” and drive through the red light.

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

Indeed, a basic premise of this book is that because social life is extremely complex, a complete social theory must account for multiple sources of action and levels of social order. Theorists must be able to account for the wide variety of components (e.g., individual predispositions, personality and emotions, social and symbolic structures) constitutive of this world. Thus, for instance, our rationalist response to the question as to why people stop at red traffic lights—that people stop simply

because they don't want to get a ticket or get into an accident—is, in fact, incomplete. It is undercut by a series of unacknowledged nonrational motivations. There is a whole host of information that undergirds the very ability of an individual to make this choice. For example, before one can even begin to make the decision as to whether to stop for the red light, one must know that normally (and legally) “red” means “stop” and “green” means “go.” That we know and take for granted that “red” means “stop” and “green” means “go” and then consciously think about and decide to override that cultural knowledge (and norm) indicates that even at our most rationalist moments, we are still using the tools of a largely taken-for-granted, symbolic, or nonrational realm (see [Table 1.1](#)).

Table 1.1 Why Do People Stop at Red Traffic Lights? Basic Approaches to Order and Action

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		ORDER	
		Individual	Collective
ACTION	Nonrational	<p><i>Value fidelity:</i> Individual believes it is good and right to follow the law.</p> <p><i>Habit:</i> Individual stops without thinking.</p>	<p><i>Hegemonic moral order:</i> Society teaches it is wrong to disobey the law.</p> <p>“Red” means “stop” and “green” means “go” in the hegemonic symbolic system.</p>
	Rational	<p><i>Instrumentality:</i> Individual does not want to get a traffic ticket.</p> <p>Individual does not want to get into an accident.</p>	<p><i>Hegemonic legal structure:</i> Society punishes those who break the law.</p>

Now let's turn to the issue of *order*.

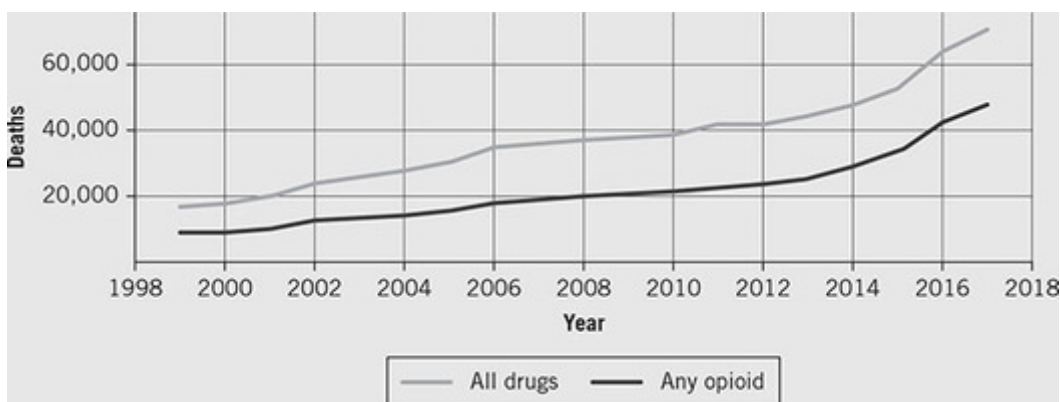
If we say, “People stop at red lights because they don’t want to get a ticket,” this can be said to reflect a collectivist approach to order, if we are emphasizing that there is a coercive state apparatus (e.g., the law, police) that hems in behavior. If such is the case, we are emphasizing that external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

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

On the other hand, that people stop at red traffic lights because they don’t want to get into an accident or get a ticket also might reflect an *individualist* approach to order, if the assumption is that the individual determines his action using his own free will, and that from this the traffic system is born. Another important individualist albeit nonrationalist answer to this question emphasizes the role of emotions. For instance, one might fear getting a ticket, and—to the extent the fear comes from within the individual rather than from the actual external circumstances—we can say this fear represents a *nonrational* motivating force at the level of the individual.

The Questions of Order and Action and the Opioid Epidemic

Because it addresses (1) the patterns of behavior that lead us to experience social life as predictable or routine and (2) the factors that motivate individuals or groups to act, the theoretical framework we use in this book enables us to navigate or contemplate *any* subject matter. In order to further illuminate this metatheoretical model, let us use it to examine a vexing social problem—the ongoing opioid epidemic in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) estimates that drug overdoses killed more than 70,000 Americans in 2017 and that more than two-thirds of these overdose deaths were due to opioids—mainly synthetic opioids (National Safety Council n.d.; see [Figure 1.4](#)). This increase means that the death toll from drug overdoses is now higher than the peak yearly death totals from HIV, car crashes, or gun deaths (Sanger-Katz 2018).



[Description](#)

Figure 1.4 Overdose Deaths in the United States, 1999–2017

Sources: National Safety Council, <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/home-and-community/safety-topics/drugoverdoses/data-details>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics; Multiple Cause of Death 1999–2017 on CDC WONDER. Multiple Cause of Death Files. 1999–2017, as compiled from data provided by the 57 Vital Statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program. Accessed at <https://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd.10.html>.

The metatheoretical framework we use in this book enables us to consider the different dimensions of this complex and dire issue. Consider first the question of *why* people take opioids. As shown in [Table 1.2](#), a *rationalist* answer to this question is that taking opioids is a (rational) *choice* in which the user deems the “benefits” (the “high”) as outweighing the “costs” (economic or other). From this point of view, more and more people are *choosing* to take opioids because they see the benefits of taking them as worth the cost, even if the cost is losing one’s job,

home, or spouse—or one’s life—down the road. By contrast, a *nonrationalist* answer to this question is that rather than rationally calculating costs and benefits, users are succumbing to a nonrational *urge* or *desire* at a biological, neurological, or emotional level. From this point of view, individuals in the throes of emotional turmoil or addiction are driven not by strategic calculation but by *nonrational* forces, such as feelings of desperation or hopelessness, or an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness, or despair.

Table 1.2 Basic Approaches to Order and Action and the Opioid Epidemic
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		ORDER	
		Individual	Collective
ACTION	Nonrational	Desire/urge to take opioids Feeling derived from opioid use	Moral order/bonds (or the lack thereof) Peer pressure
	Rational	Individual choice to take, prescribe, or deal opioids	Pharmaceutical companies Insurance companies Medical establishment Drug laws International drug trade Employment opportunities

Thus far we have examined the *individual’s* motivation to take opioids. Now let us turn to the *collectivist* dimensions of the opioid epidemic. The relevant question here is this: *How* do individuals have access to, and come to consider taking, opioids

in the first place? What are the macro-level institutions and social and cultural structures that precede and shape individual choices or urges?

As shown in [Table 1.2](#), one answer to this question is “Big Pharma”—the powerful drug companies that manufacture and market opioids. Indeed, as of this writing, more than 1,000 lawsuits have been filed by state and local governments against Purdue Pharma, company executives, and members of the Sackler family, who own and aggressively market OxyContin, in an effort to hold them accountable for the toll of the opioid epidemic. Litigants charge that the Sackler family “raked in billions of dollars” by pushing to keep patients on the powerful painkiller longer “despite evidence that the drug was helping to fuel the nation’s deadly opioid crisis” (Durkin and Mulvihill 2019). So too insurance companies—whose profits are tied to the number of patients physicians see per hour—also can be said to have a hand in the opioid epidemic, as they promote the time-saving method of handing out prescriptions over the labor-intensive process of rooting out underlying emotional and physical issues. That the economic incentives of pharmaceutical and insurance companies set the parameters for doctor–patient interactions epitomizes the *collective/rational* realm. Of course, the opioid epidemic is also rooted in even broader (collective/rational) economic and political forces, such as drug laws, the influx of heroin from abroad (and fentanyl from China in particular), employment patterns (e.g., job outsourcing), and war (and the aftereffects of war).

In terms of the *collective/nonrational* realm, if individuals turn to opioids because they feel psychologically or emotionally unmoored, this unmooring may be a function not of individual but *societal* lapses. Sadly, contemporary American society is one in which hurting individuals are prone to “fall through the cracks.” As you will read in [chapter 3](#), the French theorist Émile Durkheim discussed the relationship between individual psychological well-being and social bonds more than a century ago. In his masterpiece *Suicide* (1897/1951), Durkheim argued that high suicide rates in modern society reflected a lack of social and moral cohesion. Today, researchers are finding a connection between opioid use and social isolation. One study found that the “U.S. counties with the lowest levels of ‘social capital’—a measure of connection and support that incorporates factors including people’s trust in one another and participation in civic matters such as voting—had the highest rates of overdose deaths” (Szalavitz 2017). The relationship between opioids and social bonding is also indicated by neurological research that suggests our body’s naturally produced opioids (endorphins and closely related enkephalins) are critical to the nurturing bonds that develop between parents and offspring and monogamous mates in mammals. “The feelings that infants or adults feel when being nurtured—warmth, calmness and peacefulness—come from a combination of opioids and oxytocin. These are the same feelings that people who take opioids report: a feeling

of warmth and being nurtured or loved” (ibid.). Of course, peer pressure (in which individuals feel compelled to do what it takes to “fit in”) is merely a variation of this theme. As one analyst concludes, “if we want to have less opioid use, we may have to figure out how to have more love” (ibid.).

Most importantly, the metatheoretical framework we use in this book enables us not only to delineate the different dimensions of a complex social issue, such as the opioid epidemic, but to see the interpenetration between them. Consider, for instance, a concrete example of opioid use discussed by sociologist Matthew Desmond in his award-winning book *Evicted* (2016). Desmond tells the story of a nurse named Scott who became addicted to opiates after a doctor prescribed him Percocet for back pain. The doctor’s decision (individual/rational realm) to prescribe Scott Percocet was undoubtedly based on the parameters of his practice set by his training and the medical establishment in conjunction with insurance and pharmaceutical companies (collective/rational realm). Scott found that opioids gave him tremendous relief from not only physical but also emotional pain (individual/rational and individual/nonrational realms)—for in addition to his back problem, Scott had recently suffered the deaths of two friends from AIDS. That Scott’s addiction occurred in the midst of the AIDS crisis, mired as it was in homophobia and a political-economic situation in which AIDS was not deemed a critical societal issue (but a “gay” one), reflects the collective/nonrational and collective/rational realms. Sadly, the feeling of relief Scott got from Percocet led him to try fentanyl, which he described as “the best feeling of pleasure and contentment I have ever felt” (Desmond 2016:83). Scott’s life spun out of control. He eventually would lose his job and his home.

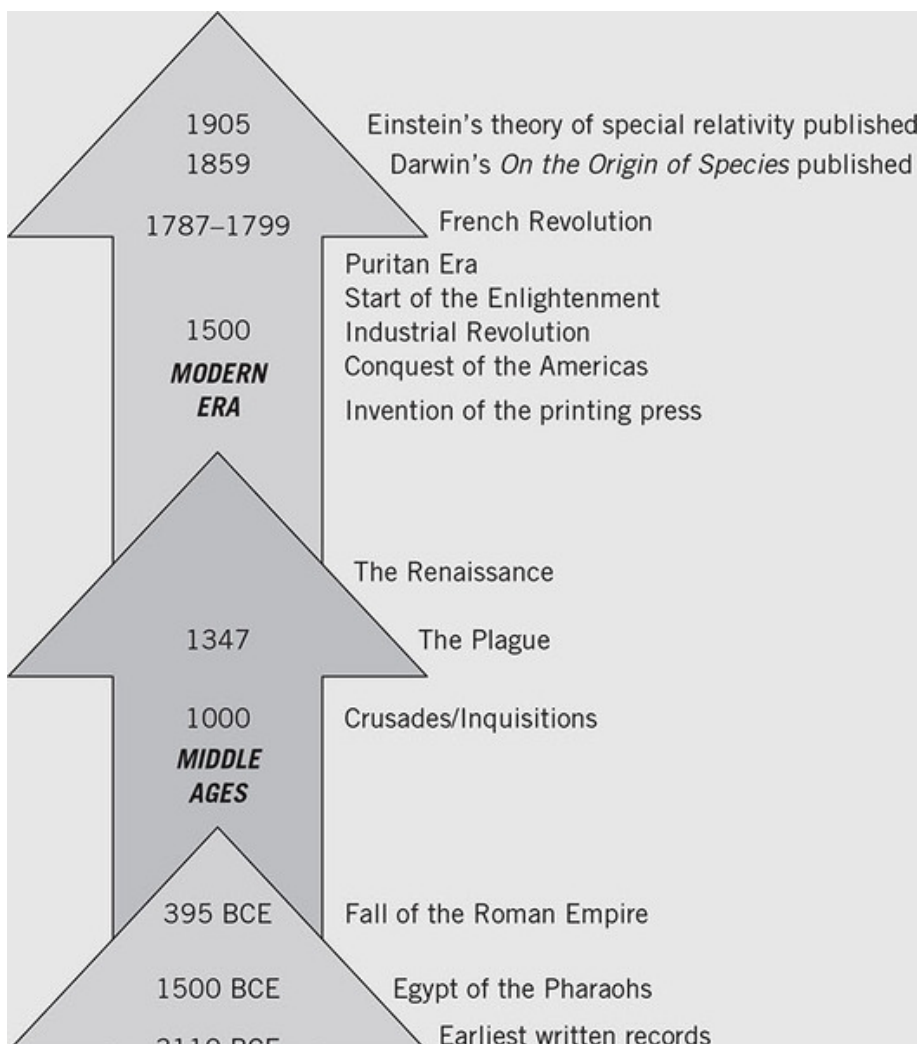
In sum, in the same way that we used the action/order theoretical framework to help us navigate the complex issue of the opioid epidemic, we use this theoretical framework throughout this book to help students navigate, and compare and contrast, the original works and central ideas of sociology’s founding figures. But this raises an important question: Why are these the core theorists? After all, the discipline of sociology has been influenced by dozens of philosophers and social thinkers. Given this fact, is it right to hold up a handful of scholars as *the* core theorists of sociology, especially if doing so leads to the canonization of a few “dead, white, European men”?

In our view, the answer is yes, it is right (or at least not wrong) to cast a select group of intellectuals as the core writers in the discipline, and yes, this leads, to an extent, to the canonization of a few dead, white, European men. On the other hand, it is these thinkers from whom later social theorists (who are not all dead, white, European, or male) primarily have drawn for inspiration and insight. To better

understand our rationale for including some theorists while excluding others, it is important first to briefly consider the historical context that set the stage for the development of sociology as a discipline.

The European Enlightenment

Many of the seeds for what would become sociology were first planted during the [Enlightenment](#), a period of remarkable intellectual development that originated in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (see [Figure 1.5](#)). The development of [civil society](#) (open spaces of debate relatively free from government control) and the quickening pace of the modern world enabled a newly emerging mass of literate citizens to think about the economic, political, and cultural conditions that shaped society. As a result, a number of long-standing ideas and beliefs about social life were turned upside down. The Enlightenment, however, was not so much a fixed set of ideas as it was a new attitude, a new method of thought. One of the most important aspects of this new attitude was an emphasis on *reason*, which demanded the questioning and reexamination of received ideas and values regarding the physical world, human nature, and their relationship to God.



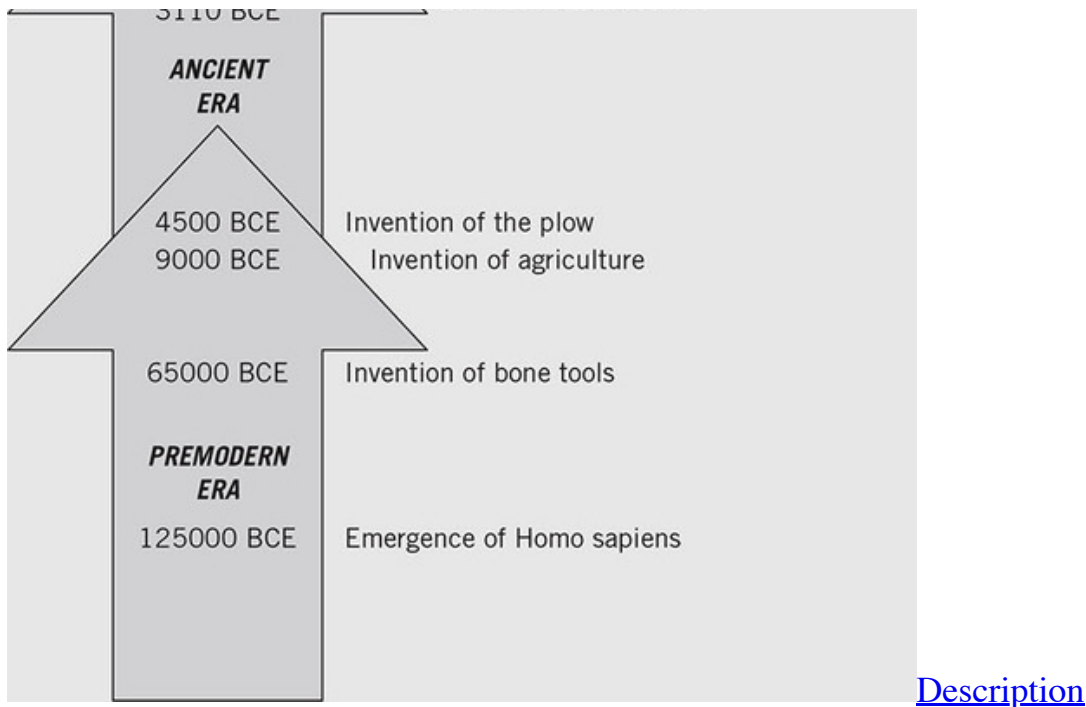


Figure 1.5 Historical Eras: A Partial Timeline

Before the Enlightenment period, there were no institutionalized academic disciplines seeking to explain the workings of the natural and social worlds. Aside from folklore, there were only the interpretations of nature and humanity sanctioned by the Catholic Church. Based on myth and faith, such explanations of the conditions of existence took on a taken-for-granted quality that largely isolated them from criticism (Lemert 1993; Seidman 1994). Enlightenment intellectuals challenged myth- and faith-based truths by subjecting them to the dictates of reason and its close cousin, science. Scientific thought had itself only begun to emerge in the fifteenth century through the efforts of astronomers and scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Bacon (see [Figure 1.5](#)). Copernicus’s discovery in the early sixteenth century that the Earth orbited the Sun directly contradicted the literal understanding of the Bible, which placed the Earth at the center of the universe. With his inventive improvement to the telescope, Galileo confirmed Copernicus’s heliocentric view the following century. Galileo’s contemporary, Sir Francis Bacon, developed an experimental, inductive approach to analyzing the natural world for which he has come to be known as the “father of the scientific method.” In advocating the triumph of reasoned investigation over faith, these early scientists and the Enlightenment intellectuals who followed in their footsteps rebuked existing knowledge as fraught with prejudice and mindless tradition (Seidman 1994:20–21). Not surprisingly, such views were dangerous because they challenged the authority of religious beliefs and those charged with advancing them. Indeed, Galileo was

convicted of heresy by the Catholic Church, had his work banned, and spent the last 10 years of his life under house arrest for advocating a heliocentric view of the universe.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Enlightenment thinkers did not set out to disprove the existence of God; with few exceptions, there were no admitted atheists during this period of European history. But though they did not deny that the universe was divinely created, they did deny that God and his work were inscrutable. Instead, they viewed the universe as a mechanical system composed of matter in motion that obeyed natural laws that could be uncovered by means of methodical observation and empirical research. Thus, when Newton developed his theory of gravity, a giant leap forward in the development of mathematics and physics, he was offering proof of God's existence. For Newton, only the intelligence of a divine power could have ordered the universe so perfectly around the sun as to prevent the planets from colliding under forces of gravity (Armstrong 1994:303). Similarly, René Descartes was convinced that reason and mathematics could provide certainty of God, whose existence could be demonstrated rationally, much like a geometric proof. Faith and reason for these individuals were not irreconcilable. The heresy committed by the Enlightenment thinkers was their attempt to solve the mystery of God's design of the natural world through the methodical, empirical discovery of eternal laws. Miracles were for the ignorant and superstitious.

Later Enlightenment thinkers, inspired by growing sophistication within the fields of physics and mathematics, would begin to advance a view of science that sought to uncover not God's imprint in the universe but, rather, the natural laws of matter that ordered the universe independent of the will of a divine Creator. Scientific inquiry was no longer tied to proving God's existence. Belief in the existence of God was becoming more a private matter of conviction and conscience that could not be subjected to rational proof but rested instead on faith. Some of the most renowned physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers of modern Western societies, from Pascal and Spinoza to Kant, Diderot, and Hume, would come to see God as a comforting idea that could offer certainty and meaning in the world or as a way to represent the summation of the causal laws and principles that ordered the universe. God, however, was not understood as a transcendent, omniscient Being who was responsible for the design of the universe and all that happens in it. And if the existence of God could not be logically or scientifically proven, then faith in his existence mattered little in explanations of reality (Armstrong 1994:311–15, 341–43). There was no longer any room left in reason and science for God.

The rise of science and empiricism ushered in by the Enlightenment would give birth to sociology in the mid-nineteenth century. The central idea behind the emerging discipline was that society could be the subject of scientific examination in the same manner as biological organisms or the physical properties of material objects. Indeed, the French intellectual **Auguste Comte** (1798–1857; see the Significant Others box below), who coined the term “sociology” in 1839, also used the term “social physics” to refer to this new discipline, which reflects his view that sociologists should scientifically uncover the laws of the social world.³ Specifically, for Comte, the new science of society — sociology — involved (1) the analysis of the central elements and functions of social systems, using (2) concrete historical and comparative methods in order to (3) establish testable generalizations about them (Fletcher 1966:14).⁴

³ Physics is often considered the most scientific and rational of all the natural sciences because it focuses on the basic elements of matter and energy and their interactions.

⁴ Of course, the scientists of the Enlightenment were not uninfluenced by subjectivity or morality. Rather, as Seidman (1994:30–31) points out, paradoxically, the Enlighteners sacralized science, progress, and reason. They deified the creators of science such as Galileo and Newton and fervently believed that “science” could resolve all social problems and restore social order, which is itself a type of “faith.”

Significant Others Auguste Comte (1798–1857): The Father of “Social Physics”

Born in southern France during a most turbulent period in French history, Auguste Comte was himself a turbulent figure. Though he excelled as a student, he had little patience for authority. Indeed, his obstinate temperament prevented him from completing his studies at the newly established École Polytechnique, Paris’s elite university. Nevertheless, Comte was able to make a name for himself in the intellectual circles of Paris. In 1817, he began working as a secretary and collaborator to Henri Saint-Simon. Their productive though fractious relationship came to an end seven years later in a dispute over assigning authorship to one of Comte’s essays. Comte next set about developing his system of positivist philosophy while working in minor academic positions for meager wages. Beginning in 1826, Comte offered a series of private lectures in an effort to disseminate his views. Though these were attended by eminent thinkers, the grandiosity of his theoretical system led some to dismiss his ideas. Nevertheless, Comte continued undeterred: from 1830 to 1842, he worked single-mindedly on his magnum opus, the six-volume *The Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842/1974). In the series, Comte not only outlines his “Law of Three Stages” (which posits that science develops through three mentally conceived stages: [1] the theological

stage, [2] the metaphysical stage, and [3] the positive stage) but also delineates the proper methods for his new science of “social physics” as well as its fundamental task—the study of social statics (order) and dynamics (progress). The work was well received in some scientific quarters, and Comte seemed poised to establish himself as a first-rate scholar. Unfortunately, his temperament again proved to be a hindrance to his success, both personal and professional. His troubled marriage ended soon after *The Positive Philosophy* was completed, and his petulance further alienated him from friends and colleagues while costing him a position at the École Polytechnique. Comte’s life took a turn for the better, however, when in 1844 he met and fell in love with Clotilde de Vaux. Their affair did not last long; Clotilde developed tuberculosis and died within a year of their first meeting. Comte dedicated the rest of his life to “his angel.” In her memory, he founded the Religion of Humanity, for which he proclaimed himself the high priest. The new church was founded on the principle of universal love as Comte abandoned his earlier commitment to science and positivism. Until his death in 1857, Comte sought not supporters for his system of science but converts to his Positive Church.

Source: This account of Comte’s biography is based largely on Lewis Coser’s (1977) discussion in *Masters of Sociological Thought*.

Thus far, we have offered a brief overview of the new scientific approach to the world characteristic of the Enlightenment. However, both the Enlightenment in general and the later emergence of sociology as a discipline were also the cause and the effect of a host of social, economic, and political transformations that had been unfolding in Western Europe since the sixteenth century. It is to a review of some of these changes that we now turn.

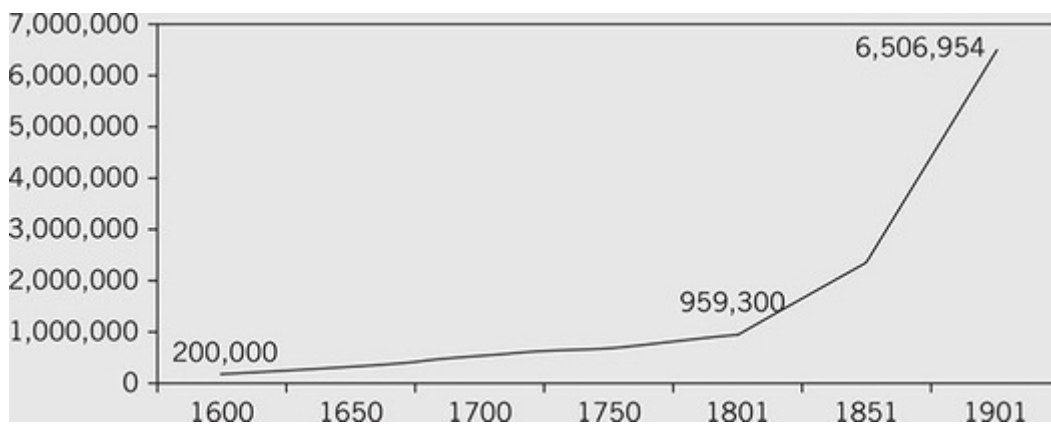
The Industrial Revolution

One of the most important of these transformations was the [Industrial Revolution](#), a period of enormous economic change that began in England in the eighteenth century. The term “Industrial Revolution” refers to the application of power-driven machinery to agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing. Although industrialization began in remote times and continues today, this process completely transformed Europe in the eighteenth century. It turned Europe from a predominantly agricultural to a predominantly industrial society. It not only radically altered how goods were produced and distributed but galvanized the system of capitalism as well.

Before the advance of modern industrialization, social life in Europe revolved around the family and kinship networks defined by blood and marriage relations. The family served as the fundamental unit for socializing individuals into the moral codes that reinforced expected patterns of behavior. In addition to its educational role, the family was also the center of production and thus responsible for the material well-being of its members. Family members grew their own food, managed their own livestock, built their own shelters, welled their own water, and made their own clothes. In short, the family depended on the skills and ingenuity of its members, and those in the broader kinship network of which it was a part, for its survival. The family as a separate private sphere, distinct from and dependent on external economic and political institutions, did not yet exist. Likewise, the idea that one may embark on a “career” or envision alternative futures, such that “anything is possible,” was inconceivable (Brown 1987:48).

The rise of industrialization, however, dramatically reshaped the organization of society. Most of the world’s population was rural before the Industrial Revolution, but by the mid-nineteenth century, half of the population of England lived in cities. As shown in [Figure 1.6](#), the population of London grew from less than a million in 1800 to more than six and a half million in 1901. So too throughout Europe, the population was becoming increasingly urban. By the end of the nineteenth century, half of the population of Europe lived in cities. Moreover, while there were scarcely any cities in Europe with populations of 100,000 in 1800, there were more than 150 cities that size a century later. This massive internal migration resulted from large numbers of people leaving farms and agricultural work to become wage earners in factories in the rapidly growing cities. The shift to factory production and wage labor meant that families were no longer the center of economic activity. Instead of producing their own goods for their own needs, families depended for their survival on impersonal labor and commodity markets. At the same time, states were

establishing public bureaucracies, staffed by trained “functionaries,” to provide a standardized education for children and to adjudicate disputes, punish rule violators, and guarantee recently enshrined individual rights. As a result of these transformations, the family was becoming increasingly privatized, its range of influence confined more and more to its own closed doors. The receding sway of family and community morality was coupled with the decline of the Church and religious worldviews. In their place came markets and bureaucratic organizations speaking their language of competition, profit, individual success, and instrumental efficiency. With the reorganization of society around the twin pillars of mass production and commerce, the “seven deadly sins became lively capitalist virtues: avarice became acumen; sloth, leisure; and pride, ambition” (Brown 1987:57).



[Description](#)

Figure 1.6 London Population, 1600–1901

The shift from agricultural to factory production had particularly profound effects on individuals. Technological changes brought ever-more-efficient machines and a growing routinization of tasks. For instance, with the introduction of the power loom in the textile industry, an unskilled worker could produce three and a half times as much as could the best handloom weaver. However, this rise in efficiency came at a tremendous human cost. Mechanized production reduced both the number of jobs available and the technical skills needed for work in the factory. Workers engaged in increasingly specialized and repetitive tasks that deprived them of meaningful connections with other workers, with the commodities they produced, and even with their own abilities. As the [division of labor](#)—the separation of a work process into a number of specialized tasks—increased and the work became more uniform, so did the workers themselves, who were as interchangeable as the mass-produced commodities they produced. A few profited enormously, but most worked long hours for low wages. Accidents were frequent and often quite serious. Workers were harshly punished and their wages were docked for the slightest

mistakes. Women and children worked alongside men in noisy, unsafe conditions. Most factories were dirty, poorly ventilated and lit, and dangerous. From the 1760s onward, labor disputes began to result in sporadic outbreaks of violent resistance. Perhaps most famous were the episodes of machine-breaking that occurred in England in what has since become known as the Luddite disturbances. As you will read in the [next chapter](#), it was precisely these dire circumstances that spawned Karl Marx's commitment to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

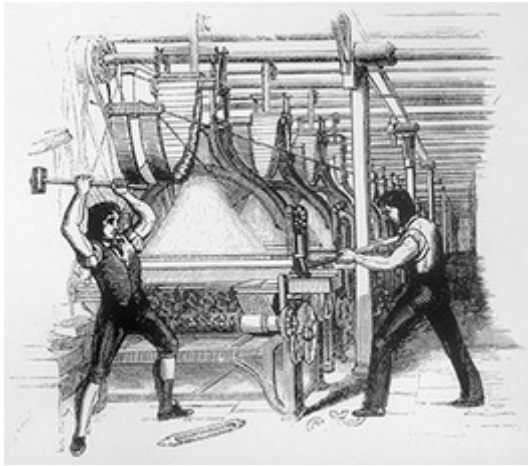


Photo 1.1 This publicly distributed illustration shows frame-breakers, or Luddites, smashing a Jacquard loom in the nineteenth century. Machine-breaking was criminalized by Parliament as early as 1721, but Luddites met a heated response, and Parliament passed the Frame Breaking Act of 1812, which enabled the death penalty for machine-breakers.

Source: Binfield, Kevin, ed. 2004. *What the Luddites Really Wanted*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

© Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy

Political and Religious Transformations

Part and parcel of the economic transformations taking place in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were revolutionary political changes. The first English parliament was established in 1215 with the historic signing of the Magna Carta, but for the next 400 years, England (and the rest of Europe) was ruled by an absolute monarchy whose authority rested in the belief in the divine right of kings. Tumultuous clashes between the Parliament and the kings over the division of power led the king to dissolve the Parliament at times, and the struggles between loyalists to the monarchy and those who sought to secure and expand the powers of parliament culminated in the English Civil War (1642–1651). The Parliamentarians were victorious, which resulted in the execution of King Charles I in 1649 and, of more lasting consequence, the end of the monarchy's absolute rule. However, Charles II (the son and heir of the executed Charles I) cobbled together an army of royalists and returned as king in 1660, ushering in a period known as the Restoration. The Restoration would collapse with the eruption of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the passage of the Bill of Rights in 1689, which codified the extent of the monarch's power while granting new, legally guaranteed powers to parliament.

Yet these partisan clashes were about not only politics but also religion. The British monarch, whose rule was based on "divine right," was considered the head of the Church of England (the Anglican Church), and by law, everyone in England was supposed to belong to the Church. But in the seventeenth century, independent churches began to form, which challenged the authority of both the monarchy and the Church. The first meeting of what would become the Baptist Church took place in 1612, and by the end of the century, sects of Puritans, Congregationalists, Independents, and Quakers had emerged, all of whom believed that congregations had the right to run their own affairs without interference. Supporters of the Church of England fought back with new laws, such as the Act of Uniformity of 1662, which mandated that all clergy must use the Book of Common Prayer, and the Conventicle Act of 1664, which forbade unauthorized religious meetings of more than five people (unless they were all of the same household). Defiant church leaders, such as the founder of the Quakers, George Fox (1624–1691), were persecuted and imprisoned, while other religious rebels, most famously the Puritans, fled to the New World.

The French Revolution

Europe was awash in political and religious clashes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But undoubtedly one of the most significant of these events was the French Revolution (1787–1799). Inspired in large part by Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762; discussed later in the chapter), the basic principle of the French Revolution, as contained in its primary manifesto, “La Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen” (“The Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen”; National Assembly of France 1789), was that “all men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” Spurred by the philosophies of the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment, revolutionaries toppled the *ancien régime*, or old rule, that for centuries had consolidated wealth, land, and power in the hands of the clergy and a nobility based on heredity. Government would no longer be justified on the basis of a sacred, inviolable relation between rulers and subjects. Reason would be substituted for tradition, and equal rights for privilege, and “liberty, fraternity, and equality” would prevail. Because the revolutionaries sought to build a constitutional government from the bottom up, the French Revolution stimulated profound political rethinking about the nature of government and its proper relation to its citizens and set the stage for democratic uprisings throughout Europe.

However, the French Revolution sparked a bloody aftermath, making it clear that even democratic revolutions involve tremendous social disruption and that heinous deeds can be done in the name of freedom. The public beheading of King Louis XVI in the *Place de la Révolution* (“Revolution Square”) ushered in what would come to be called the “Reign of Terror.” Led by Maximilien Robespierre, radical democrats rounded up and executed anyone—whether on the left or right of the political spectrum—suspected of being opposed to the revolution. In the months between September 1793 (when Robespierre took power) and July 1794 (when Robespierre was overthrown and executed), revolutionary zealots, under the auspices of the newly created “Committee of Public Safety,” arrested about 300,000 people, executed some 17,000, and imprisoned thousands more. It was during this radical period of the Republic that the guillotine, adopted as an efficient and merciful method of execution, became the symbol of the Terror. While the years following the French Revolution by no means drew a straight line to creating a democratically elected government guaranteeing the rights and equality of all, its effects nevertheless reverberated across the continent. The legitimacy of monarchical rule and inherited privilege that had undergirded European societies for centuries was now challenged by a worldview that sought to place the direction of political and economic life into the hands of individuals armed with the capacity to reason.

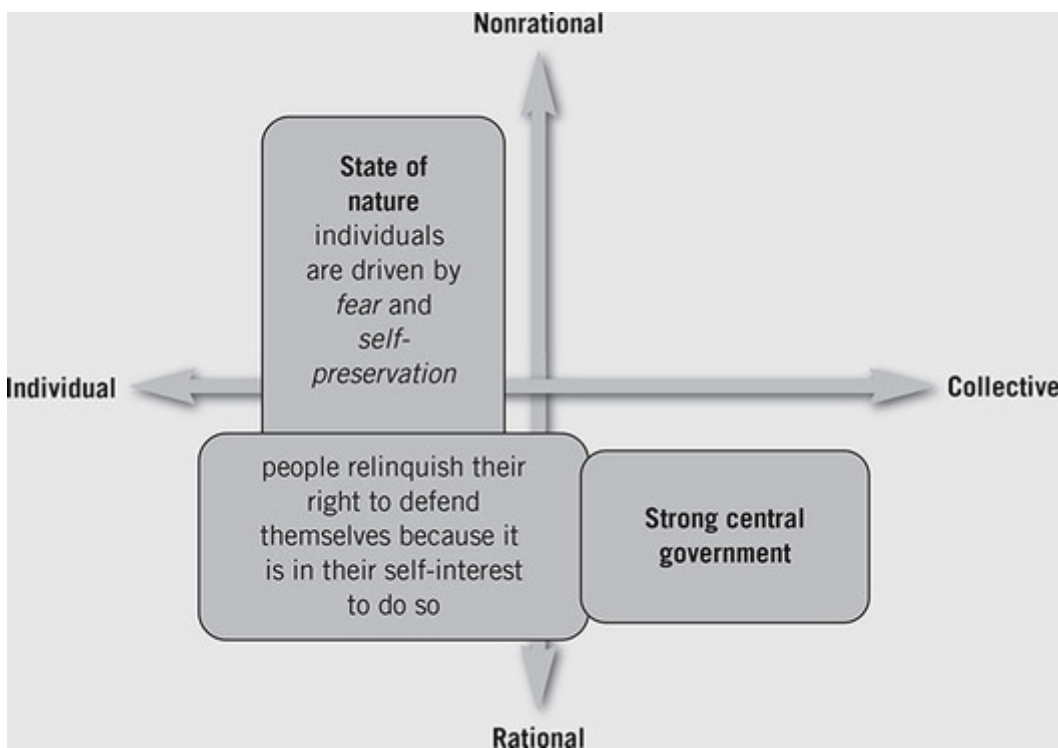
In sum, it was against a backdrop of volatile political, economic, and religious change that Enlightenment thinkers developed their philosophies and, later, that sociology as a unique discipline would emerge. The steady erosion of monarchical and ecclesiastical authority, and the more general collapse of feudal society, compelled Enlightenment thinkers to come to grips with the question of *order*. Without the king or Church as the unequivocal foundation of society, how would social order be maintained? What would ensure that the social fabric would remain intact? Would the individual capacity for rational thought be enough to secure social stability? Or would the rationality and emerging autonomy of the individual result in prizing one's own interest over and against that of the broader society? Are the interests of the individual and those of the society in fundamental conflict? Could the rational interests of the individual and the broader society be in harmony? What mechanisms would enable the synthesis of individual and collective interests? These are the fundamental issues that the Enlightenment philosophers explored.

Enlightenment Thinkers and the Questions of Order and Action

One of the most important thinkers to emerge during the Enlightenment period was the English philosopher **Thomas Hobbes** (1588–1679). Oftentimes regarded as “the founder of modern social thought” (Kimmel and Stephen 1998:4), Hobbes was “the first thinker to see the necessity of explaining why human society is not a ‘war of all against all’” (Wrong 1961:185). Hobbes subscribed to a then-radical view that championed the natural equality of all individuals. At the same time, however, Hobbes maintained that humans are naturally asocial, driven by selfishness, violence, and fear, and that in “a state of nature” it is legitimate for individuals to use whatever means are at their disposal to survive to ensure self-preservation. Given these alleged “natural” traits, Hobbes maintained that absolute authority is the only thing that can hold society together. Peace and prosperity can be maintained only if individuals agree to relinquish their freedoms to a central government—the Leviathan—that ruled through the consent of the people. Rational individuals agree to relinquish their “natural” right to defend themselves, thereby giving the central government the sole authority to protect citizens. Likewise, it is in the rational interest of individuals to permit the central government to restrain the strong from exploiting the weak (see [Figure 1.7](#)). This exchange of some individual liberty for some common security is the famous “social contract” for which Hobbes is well known. In his masterpiece of political philosophy, *Leviathan* (1651/1991), Hobbes maintains that without the controlling force of an absolute authority, our lives would be “nasty, brutish, and short.” Men would be in a chronic state of fear, insecurity, and violence—a “war of all against all.” As Hobbes (1651/1991) famously states:

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short. (89)

Hobbes’s defense of the absolute right of kings — not because this right was endowed by God, but because it was rooted in a consensual social contract — infuriated both monarchists who believed in the divine right of kings, and parliamentarians, such as Locke and Rousseau (discussed shortly), who eschewed monarchism altogether.

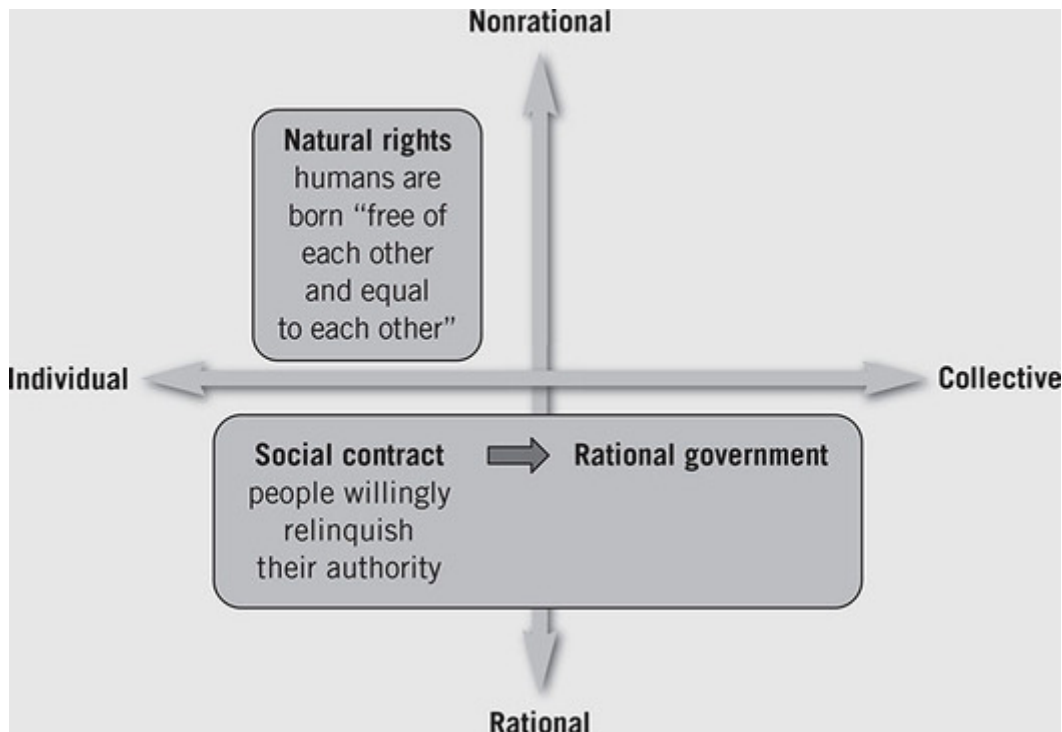


[Description](#)

Figure 1.7 Hobbes’s Basic Theoretical Orientation

For his part, the so-called father of liberalism, **John Locke** (1632–1704), answered the question of order in a considerably different way than his compatriot Hobbes. Like Hobbes, Locke viewed individuals as innately “free of each other and equal to each other” (Thomson 2010:18). But Locke rejected Hobbes’s view of humans as governed by self-preservation. He disputed the false dichotomy that Hobbes posed between despotism and anarchy, and he rejected Hobbes’s assessment of humans as so competitive and intent on maximizing their own gain that only absolute authority could hope to restrain them. Instead, Locke maintained that human beings were governed by “natural laws” derived from the Creator. These laws of nature included an individuals’ right to their person as well as to their possessions. As Locke states, because all mankind is equal and independent, “no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty or Possessions” (Locke 1689/1988, as cited by Thomson 2010:19). Locke viewed humans as capable of using reason and rationality to create governments whose authority would be based not on despotism and force but on

consensually established impersonal laws, designed to protect free and equal citizens' "natural" rights to "life, liberty, and estate" (see [Figure 1.8](#)).



[Description](#)

Figure 1.8 Locke's Basic Theoretical Orientation

For Locke, the powers of the constitutional government must be contractually granted by the majority of free men. Because government is based on a social contract between free and equal parties advancing their mutual interest, its main function is to judge the disputes of citizens fairly and equally and to enforce the laws on everyone (Thomson 2010:20). This notion of popular sovereignty—the notion that no one was above the law—was the radical crux of Locke's writing: people have the right to choose their government and the right to rebel against a sovereign who has violated the social contract. Thus, in stark contrast to Hobbes (who, as we have seen, viewed absolute authority as essential to preventing social conflict), Locke advocated the overturning of arbitrary, despotic monarchies, by revolution if necessary.

Locke's views on human nature, reason, equality, and rule by popular consent would inspire many of the leading figures of the American Revolution. Indeed, historians commonly portray Locke as "the single most important influence that shaped the founding of the United States" (ushistory.org 2020).

In terms of our theoretical framework, in advocating the triumph of reasoned investigation over faith, Enlighteners such as Hobbes and Locke celebrated a rationalistic approach to action—the human ability to overcome nonrational sentiments or use them for the collective good (see [Figure 1.7](#) and [Figure 1.8](#)). Although they viewed the essence of human nature differently—with Hobbes emphasizing the innate drives of (nonrational) fear and (rational) self-interest, and Locke emphasizing the (nonrational) natural rights endowed by the Creator—Hobbes and Locke concurred as to the (individual/rational) motivation behind relinquishing authority to a strong central government to ensure social order (collective/rational realm).

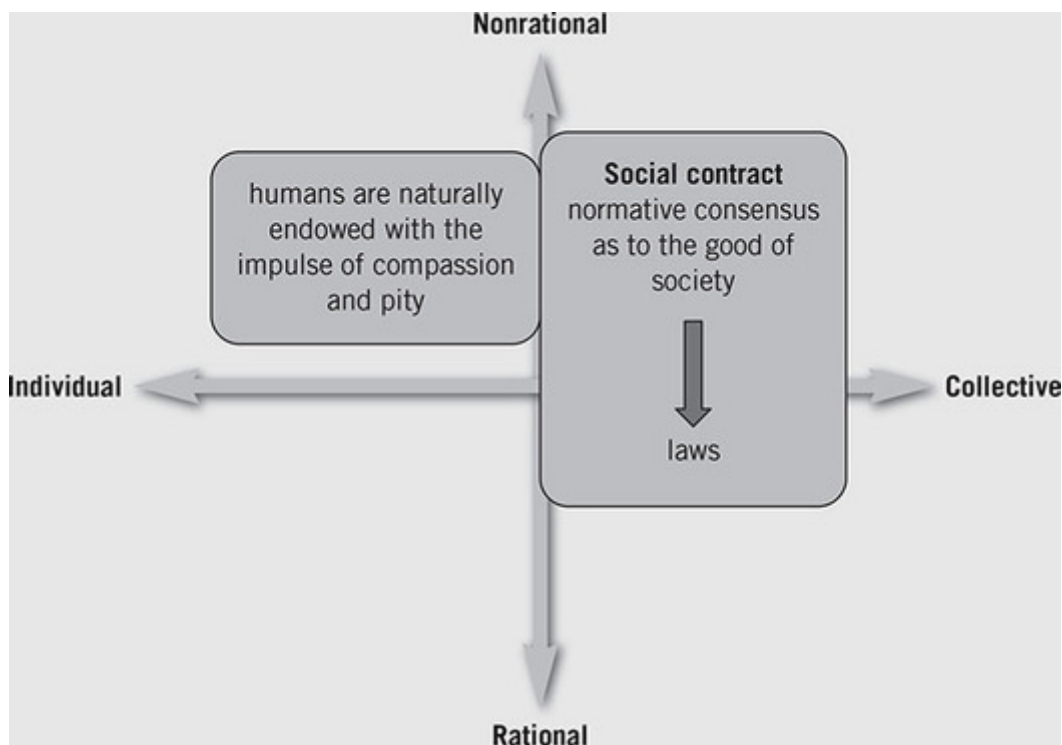
It was precisely this unabashed embrace of rationality that was behind a romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, called the [counter-Enlightenment](#), that began to take root in the eighteenth century. Concerned about the disorganizing effects brought about by the dizzying pace of industrialization and urbanization, counter-Enlighteners such as **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712–1778) highlighted the importance of nonrational factors, such as tradition, emotions, ritual, and ceremony, to the stability of society. Like Hobbes, Rousseau asserted that humans in their natural state were guided by the principle of self-preservation. Unlike Hobbes, however, Rousseau viewed humans as naturally endowed with the impulse of compassion and pity and argued that solitary humans in a state of nature would express the virtues of simplicity and essential goodness, having “not the slightest notion of mine and thine” (Thomson 2010:39). Writing on the corrupting influence of possessions and self-interest, Rousseau remarked:

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors Mankind would have been spared by him who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his kind: Beware of listening to this impostor; You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone’s and the Earth no one’s. (Rousseau, *Foundations of Inequality*, p. 60, as cited in Thomson 2010:40)

Indeed, in his first published work, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1749; see Gay 1987), Rousseau controversially argued that it was human institutions that contributed to the corruption of morals. In a scathing attack on scientific progress and civilization, Rousseau contended that the human species is better, wiser, and happier in its primitive state and evil to the extent that it moves away from this

natural condition. He saw nature, including human nature, as essentially good—and the supreme good as freedom. The more natural and “uncivilized” the human group, the less corrupt they are, while the allegedly superior rational faculties leave us lifeless and cold, uncertain and unsure.

Akin to Locke, Rousseau tied social order to a “social contract,” yet in contrast to Locke (and Hobbes), who rooted order in a (rational) contract between the people and a ruler, Rousseau grounded the social contract in a (nonrational) normative consensus or the “will of the people” (Wrong 1994:9; see [Figure 1.9](#)). Rousseau believed that social order is best maintained not by the coercive power of a central authority but by people willingly obeying the laws because they helped make them. In order to have a free and equal society, everyone must participate in creating laws for the good of society (the social contract), which, as shown in [Figure 1.9](#), situates social order in the collective/nonrational realm. In short, while Hobbes and Locke celebrated the (social) *contract*, Rousseau celebrated the *social* (contract), that is, the collective good.



[Description](#)

Figure 1.9 Rousseau’s Basic Theoretical Orientation

Yet Rousseau doubted that a genuinely democratic government was possible. His depiction of a society based on a contract between free and equal people expressing their general will was hypothetical, and he used this hypothetical society to criticize

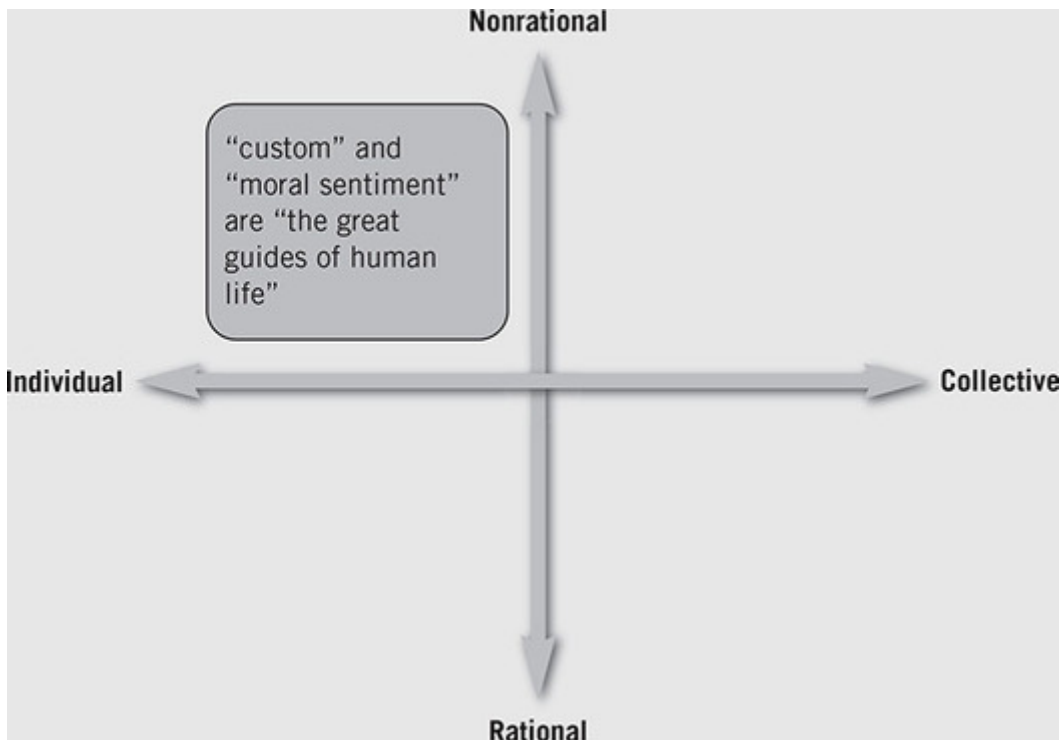
the oppressive and restrictive government of his day. Indeed, a social contract that legitimates the use of force to compel an individual to obey the general will may result in the majority oppressing a minority, which contradicts the “natural order” in which individuals are “free of each other and equal to each other.” In other words, if the individual has natural liberty, his interests may conflict with the common interest of the society as a whole. As Rousseau (1792, as cited in Thomson 2010) states, “man was born free, and everywhere he is chains” (38).

David Hume (1711–1776) was another Enlightenment philosopher who sought to uncover the foundations of society in the wake of the demise of ecclesiastical and monarchical authority. Like Locke and Hobbes, Hume embraced the notion that individuals possess the capacity for reason. Yet, perhaps because he was writing during a period of relative peace, Hume maintained that societal stability rested on individuals becoming “accustomed to obedience” to the law so that justice is administered and peace and safety are ensured (Hume 1777/2006:314, 315). Social order was thus attributed to the weight of habit and custom, that is, the nonrational realm (see [Figure 1.10](#)). According to Hume, it is habit and custom that restrain our passions and motivate us to hold up our social obligations, rather than rational cost/benefit calculations aimed at furthering our self-interests. Our daily conduct—and social order more generally—is shaped by recurring experiences that lead to the repetitive or “customary” association between concepts (e.g., knowing to stand in line while waiting). In this way, our actions are guided less by any sort of conscious, deliberative weighing of cause and effect. As Hume (1748/2007) states:

Custom . . . is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past. Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and senses. We should never know how to adjust means to ends, or to employ our natural powers in the production of any effect. (31)

Relatedly, Hume contended that while the utility of particular means for achieving our ends can be subjected to a rational calculation, the “ultimate” ends of our actions are not evaluated relative to whether or not they serve our self-interest but are judged according to the “sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties” (Hume 1751/2006:273). It is not reason but, rather, “moral sentiment”—“a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a

resentment of their misery”—that allows us to distinguish between virtue and vice (ibid.:269).

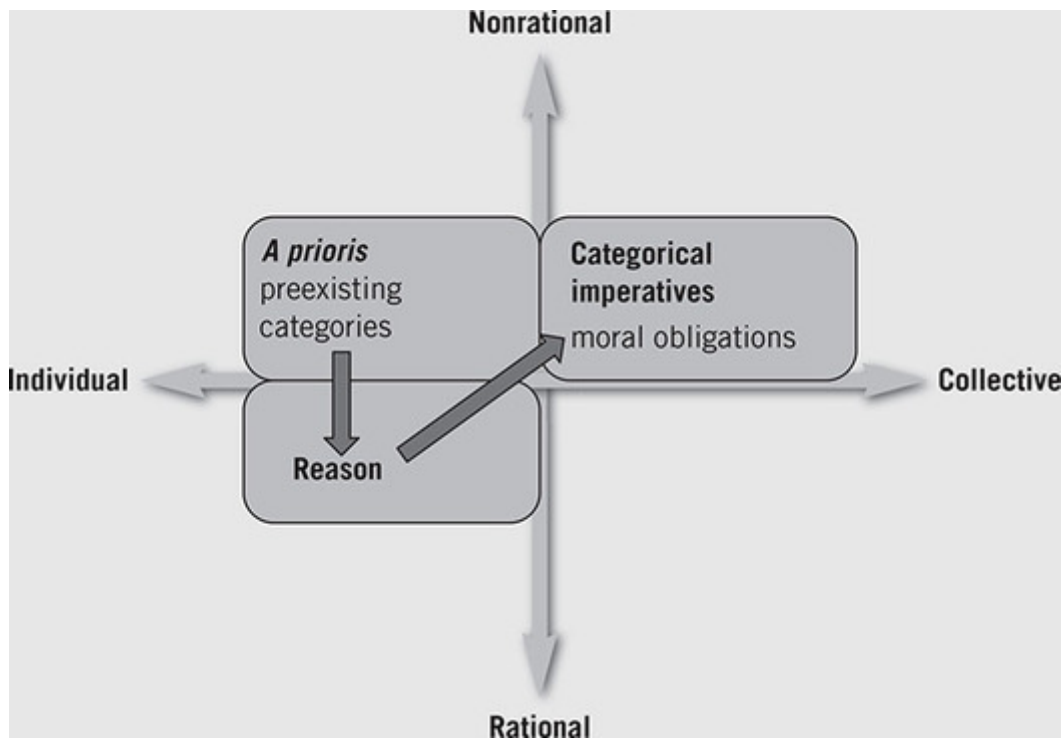


[Description](#)

Figure 1.10 Hume’s Basic Theoretical Orientation

Like Rousseau and Hume, the Prussian philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804) was also wary of the increasingly rationalistic nature of modern society. Though he considered *secularization* (the declining significance of religion) the defining characteristic of his era, he understood the need to preserve the moral compass provided by religion. In an extraordinary blend of nonrational and rational motivation, Kant recast the essential religious maxims into secular terms, which he called “categorical imperatives” (see [Figure 1.11](#)). Categorical imperatives are moral obligations derived from *reason* rather than religion. For Kant, the highest form of reason is when individuals raise themselves above their own particular point of view in order to see and understand universal truths. Acting morally means making your actions conform to those universally valid rules and maxims that impersonal reasoning can deduce. Thus, moral behavior should be a function of our *intellect* rather than our emotions or irrational beliefs (such as the fear of God or a preoccupation with salvation). Consider, for instance, Kant’s recasting of the “Golden Rule” (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) as this: *act according to only that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it shall become a universal law*. Kant’s point is that rather than obey the Golden Rule

because it is “God-given,” we can have the same result by imagining the consequences of our actions if everyone were to act the same way. This enables us to act according to what is “categorically” best for everyone in all cases, rather than simply our own self-interest. According to Kant, freedom comes not from doing whatever we want (as libertarians would have it) but from the ability to use our minds; those who act according to their own passions or self-interests or those of others are “slaves.”



[Description](#)

Figure 1.11 Kant’s Basic Theoretical Orientation

In his 800-page opus, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1987), Kant argued that rather than being a blank slate, the human mind contains structures that organize our perceptions. Kant used the term *a priori* to refer to these universal elements in all knowledge that inhere in the mind from birth. *A priori*, which include concepts such as time, space, and cause and effect, are subjective “‘intuitions’ that exist *prior to* experience and are necessary to make sense of it” (Thomson 2010:65, emphasis added). For Kant, the never-ending streams of sensory impressions that confront the individual would have no unity or pattern without this *a priori* (preexisting) framework to give them form and meaning (see [Figure 1.11](#)). Kant’s focus on meaning, and the question of how meaning is created, has been particularly influential in the development of sociology. As you will see in the following

chapters, core classical theorists such as Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Mead all devised their theories of meaning by explicitly drawing on Kant.

The Limits of Enlightenment

Thus far, we have seen that Enlightenment thinking paved the way for both modern liberalism and the development of the discipline of sociology. However, it is imperative to note that “race” as we understand it—a biological taxonomy that turns physical difference into relations of domination—and racism are products of the Enlightenment as well. Scientific theories of race, that is, “scientific” classifications of humanity into racial hierarchies in which those at the bottom were deemed inferior and unable to assimilate to the culture of superior races, emerged right alongside the notion of the “natural equality of all individuals” during the Enlightenment. This is not coincidental. Scientific racism and white supremacy adroitly resolved “the fundamental contradiction between professing liberty and upholding slavery” (Bouie 2018). And the very term “Enlightenment” gave legitimacy to the long-held racist “connection between lightness and Whiteness and reason, on the one hand, and darkness and Blackness and ignorance on the other” (Kendi 2016:80–81).

Indeed, Kant was among the first to explicitly articulate a theory of scientific racism that continues to haunt modern society to this day. In addition to his dense philosophical works, Kant wrote essays on a variety of topics, including politics, law, aesthetics, astronomy, geography, and history. In his anthropological writings, Kant equated race with reason, stating that “humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites” (Sica 2004:59). Kant asserted the moral as well as intellectual superiority of (white) Northern Europeans over the “unreason” and savagery of the rest of the world (Eze 1997:5). In a similar vein, although Locke championed the idea that each of us, by virtue of being human, has inalienable rights that no organized entity can strip away, he also had a financial stake in a slave trading company, and he helped draft documents that explicitly granted citizens the right to own “negro slaves” as well (Kimmel and Stephen 1998:vii). When Locke insisted that people were equal, he really meant white, propertied males. Yet, most significantly, it was not only Kant and Locke but the vast majority of Enlightenment thinkers who subscribed to a virulent white supremacy. Enlighteners were divided not between those who were white supremacists and those who were not but between those who used Enlightenment race “science” to argue that the Negro “species” had serious anatomical and cognitive deficiencies that “destined them for slavery” and more “liberal” thinkers who advocated for an “enlightened form of slavery” that encouraged slave owners to treat their slaves kindly (Curran 2019:367).⁵

⁵ Louis de Jaucourt (1704–1779) and Denis Diderot (1713–1784) are two important exceptions here. According to Curran (2019:168; 365–66), de Jaucourt

unambiguously proclaimed that slavery “violates religion, morality, natural law, and all the rights of human nature” and argued that Africans who had been taken as slaves had the right to declare themselves free, while Diderot rejected the era’s illegitimate race science and forcefully attacked what he believed to be his era’s most glaring evil: the business of African chattel slavery.

To be sure, Enlightenment intellectuals’ presumption of the inherent rationality and equality of human beings did not extend to women, either. **Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759–1797), often deemed “the first feminist,” was among the first to apply the idea of natural rights to women. Wollstonecraft suffered a tumultuous childhood in London, as her father squandered the family’s money and flew into drunken rages. In 1778, Wollstonecraft decided to strike out on her own, but she was frustrated by the lack of career options for educated but poor women (eloquently described in a chapter aptly titled “Unfortunate Situation of Females, Fashionably Educated, and Left Without a Fortune” in her book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 1787). In 1786, Wollstonecraft made the radical decision to try to earn her living as an author—a path that few women pursued in her day. She dedicated herself to learning French and German and translating texts (most notably *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions* by Jacques Necker and *Elements of Morality, for the Use of Children* by Christian Gotthilf Salzmann) and writing both fiction and nonfiction. Wollstonecraft was among the first writers to critique the conservative Edmund Burke’s denunciation of the French Revolution. First published anonymously, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) was an overnight success, and the second edition came out in December of that year with Wollstonecraft’s authorship revealed. Wollstonecraft was compared favorably with such luminary Enlightenment thinkers as Thomas Paine, whose *Rights of Man* (1791; see ushistory.org n.d.) similarly condemned Burke’s support of the monarchy. Wollstonecraft followed *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) with *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which would prove to be Wollstonecraft’s most famous and influential work. Here, she eloquently argued that women were human beings deserving of the same rights as men, not ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Wollstonecraft argued against the tyranny of kingship, the Church, and the patriarchal family. Her central focus, however, was equality in education and the opening up of professions to women. Wollstonecraft shocked readers by maintaining that boys and girls should be educated together and that men should value women as rational beings and not mere objects of pleasure. She lamented the social construction of women as sentimental creatures, and she maintained that women colluded in their own oppression by accepting their political powerlessness and using their sexual power to seduce men

(Kimmel and Stephen 1998:84). As Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, as cited in Kimmel and Stephen 1998) states:

I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt . . . the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.
(91)

The Ins and Outs of the Sociological Theory “Canon”

Thus far, we have argued that the central figures at the heart of classical sociological theory all sought to explain the extraordinary economic, political, and social transformations taking place in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Yet concerns about the nature of social bonds and how these bonds can be maintained in the face of extant social change existed long before the eighteenth century and in many places, not only in Western Europe. Indeed, in the late fourteenth century, Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun (1332–1406), born in Tunis, North Africa, wrote extensively on subjects that have much in common with contemporary sociology (Martindale 1981:134–36; Ritzer and Goodman 2004:5). And long before the fourteenth century, Plato (ca. 428–ca. 347 bce), Aristotle (384–322 bce), and Thucydides (ca. 460–ca. 400 bce) wrote about the nature of war, the origins of the family and the state, and the relationship between religion and the government—topics that have since become central to sociology (Seidman 1994:19). Aristotle, for example, emphasized that human beings were naturally political animals (*zoon politikon*; Martin 1999:157), and he sought to identify the “essence” that made a stone a stone or a society a society (Ashe 1999:89). For that matter, well before Aristotle’s time, Confucius (551–479 bce) developed a theory for understanding Chinese society. Akin to Aristotle, Confucius maintained that government is the center of people’s lives and that all other considerations derive from it. According to Confucius, a good government must be concerned with three things: sufficient food, a sufficient army, and the confidence of the people (Jaspers 1957/1962:47).

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

Our key point here is that while the ideas of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are today at the heart of the classical sociological theoretical canon, they are not inherently better or more original than those of other intellectuals who wrote before or after them. Rather, it is to say that, for specific historical, social, and cultural as well as

intellectual reasons, their works have helped define the discipline of sociology and that sociologists refine, rework, and challenge their ideas to this day.

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

In sum, determining who sociology’s “core” theorists are is a controversial and subjective matter, and the individuals we feature in this volume are by no means unanimously “core.” That said, in [Part I](#) of this book, we focus on three pivotal thinkers who helped lay the groundwork for the discipline of sociology and around whom fundamental theoretical traditions in sociology have been formed. The German philosopher and social critic **Karl Marx** (1818–1883) is undoubtedly the most well known of these three individuals. His politico-economic critique of capitalism is one of the most influential theories in history. As you will see in the [next chapter](#), Marx was particularly concerned about the economic changes and disorganizing social effects that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and its emerging class structure. He not only wrote theoretical works on the development of capitalism but also was a political activist who helped organize revolutionary labor movements to provoke broad social change. As is readily apparent in Marx’s unwavering emphasis on the inherent, systemic flaws of capitalism, throughout his work, Marx focused on the macro-level, structural (collective/rational) factors that he viewed as the driving force of history.

In [chapter 3](#), you will see that while, like Marx, the French theorist **Émile Durkheim** (1858–1917) was concerned about the impact of rapid social change on individuals and groups, he was most interested in the systems of meaning that hold societies or social groups together (the collective/nonrational realm). For Durkheim, whether “traditional” or “modern,” social life hinges on social solidarity or cohesion rooted in a shared moral code, and, especially in his later work, he sought to explain how these oftentimes intangible social forces organize and order our world.

In [chapter 4](#), we focus on **Max Weber** (1864–1920), who, like Marx and Durkheim, also explored the social transformations taking place in European society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, in contrast to Marx, Weber argued that it was not only economic structures (e.g., capitalism) but also organizational structures—most importantly bureaucracies—that profoundly affected social relations. In addition, Weber examined the systems of meaning or ideas that induced such profound structural change. By examining the interpenetration of structural forces, such as the capitalist economy and bureaucracy, as well as more ideological forces, such as religion, Weber offered a more multidimensional theory than either Marx or Durkheim. Indeed, as you will see, Weber’s most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is a landmark in the history of sociology precisely because of its theoretical complexity, that is, the interpenetration of nonrational and rational motivations at the individual and collective levels.

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

Georg Simmel (1858–1918), a German sociologist, wrote works that would later become pivotal in sociology, though his career was consistently stymied both because of the unusual breadth and content of his work and because of his Jewish background.⁶ Simmel sought to uncover the basic *forms* of social interaction, such as “exchange,” “conflict,” and “domination,” that take place between individuals. Above all, Simmel underscored the contradictions of modern life; for instance, he emphasized how individuals strive to conform to social groups and, at the same time, to distinguish themselves from others. Simmel’s provocative work is gaining more and more relevance in today’s world where contradictions and ironies abound.

⁶ Durkheim was also Jewish (indeed, he was the son of a rabbi). But anti-Semitism did not significantly impede Durkheim’s career. In fact, it was Durkheim’s eloquent article “Individualism and the Intellectuals” (1898/1973), on the Dreyfus affair (a political scandal that emerged after a Jewish staff officer named Captain Alfred Dreyfus was erroneously court-martialed for selling secrets to the German embassy in Paris), that shot him to prominence and eventually brought Durkheim his first

academic appointment in Paris. In sum, German anti-Semitism was much more harmful to Simmel than French anti-Semitism was to Durkheim.

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

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

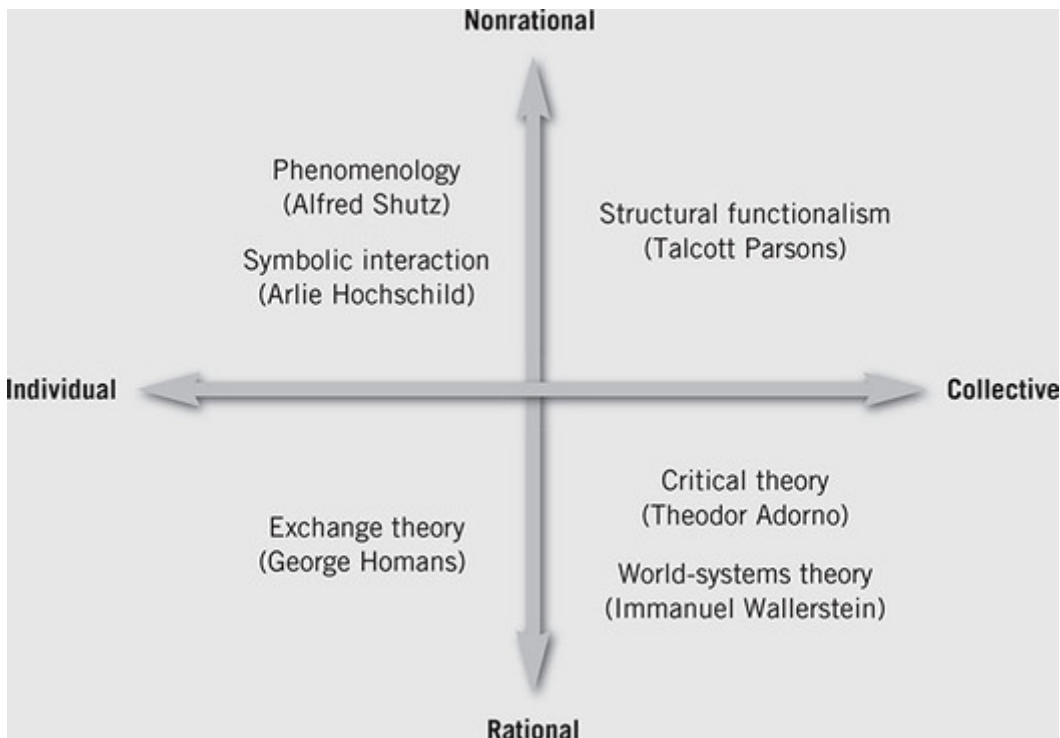
Contemporary Sociological Theory

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

Clearly, determining the "ins and outs" of contemporary theory is a controversial and subjective matter, and, as such, the writers whose work we feature in this volume are by no means unanimously "core." As with the classical theorists discussed earlier, we address this issue within the space constraints of this book by providing a briefer look at a number of important theorists in the Significant Others boxes of the chapters that follow. That said, here we take a broad, historical perspective, prioritizing individuals whose work has significantly influenced others—and the discipline itself. That is, we look at individuals around whom specific theoretical "traditions" have been formed, from the mid-twentieth century until today.

In [Part III](#), we focus on several major perspectives that have emerged in contemporary sociological theory. We begin with the tradition of *structural functionalism* and the work of **Talcott C. Parsons** and one of his most prolific students, **Robert K. Merton**. From the 1930s through the 1970s, functionalism was the dominant theoretical approach in American sociology. Structural functionalists introduced central concepts such as "role," "norm," and "social system" into the discipline of sociology. They also coined several concepts, such as "role model" and "self-fulfilling prophecy," that are in widespread colloquial as well as academic use today. Yet structural functionalism is most well known not for the specific ideas it introduced but rather for the metatheoretical framework on which it is based. Indeed, the very analytical map used in this book (discussed previously) is rooted in Parsons's provocative metatheoretical model. As you will see, however, because of

his emphasis on the cultural realm, we situate his work, overall, in the nonrational, collective realm (see [Figure 1.12](#)).



[Description](#)

Figure 1.12 Basic Orientation of Core Perspectives in Contemporary Sociological Theory

[Chapter 10](#) examines a broad body of work known as **critical theory**. Firmly rooted in the Marxist tradition, critical theorists seek to illuminate the oppressive nature of modern capitalistic societies; in so doing, they tend to take a collectivist and rationalist approach in explaining the social world (see [Figure 1.12](#)). We begin by focusing on the Frankfurt School, a contingent of German theorists writing from the 1920s through the 1960s who were deeply concerned about social and economic inequalities. Due in large measure to the dominance of the structural functionalist paradigm, however, the ideas expressed within this perspective would not find wide dissemination in the United States until the 1960s, when the sweeping social and cultural changes occurring in the broader society demanded a radically different theoretical approach for their explanation. Rather than emphasizing societal cohesion or consensus, as structural functionalists typically did, the Frankfurt School theorists (represented here by **Theodor Adorno** and **Herbert Marcuse**) underscored the divisive aspects of the social order and the alienating conditions said to characterize modern societies. Though similarly concerned about extant social and economic inequalities, the contemporary critical theorists whose works

you also will read in [chapter 10](#)—**Jürgen Habermas** and **Patricia Hill Collins**—reject the Frankfurt School’s bleak portrayal as to the nature of modern society, focusing instead on how individuals and social groups navigate even the most inequitable and oppressive circumstances. They place hope in the emancipation of humanity in the counterweight of social movements, as well as the intellectual traditions of marginalized communities. They explicitly develop multidimensional models that speak to the theoretical deficiencies of the Frankfurt School. As shown in [Figure 1.12](#), one of the most important characteristics of both functionalism and critical theory is their collectivist or “macro” approach to social order. However, a variety of more individualist perspectives focusing more on the “micro” dimension of the social order were developing alongside these two theoretical camps. In [chapter 11](#), we examine two of the most important of these perspectives: *exchange theory* and *rational choice theory*. Instead of looking to social systems or institutions for explanations of social life, exchange theorists emphasize individual behavior. Moreover, they consider individuals to be strategic actors whose behavior is guided by exchanges of benefits and costs. Based on rational calculations, individuals use the resources they have at their disposal in an effort to optimize their rewards. We focus especially on the work of two renowned exchange theorists: **George C. Homans**, who draws principally from behavioral psychology and neoclassical economics, and **Peter M. Blau**, who, while sympathetic to economics, evinces a greater indebtedness to the German sociologist Georg Simmel (see [chapter 6](#)). In addition, we examine the work of **James S. Coleman**, who is one of the central figures within rational choice theory. While both exchange and rational choice theorists view the actors as purposive agents motivated by maximizing rewards, exchange theorists focus on the strategic decision making of individuals and how such decisions affect social relationships. For their part, rational choice theorists emphasize how group dynamics themselves shape individuals’ decisions. The predominantly individualist and rationalist approach of exchange theory is illustrated in [Figure 1.12](#).

In [chapter 12](#), “Symbolic Interactionism and Dramaturgical Theory,” we continue our discussion of analyses of everyday life by examining the work of **Erving Goffman** and **Arlie Russell Hochschild**. The tradition of *symbolic interactionism* focuses not so much on the strategic motivation for action as it does on interpretation and shared *meaning*, which reflects an emphasis on the nonrational (as opposed to the rational) realm (see [Figure 1.12](#)). As the leading proponent of *dramaturgy*, Erving Goffman occupies a unique place in the pantheon of contemporary theorists. While rooted in part in a symbolic interactionist approach, Goffman also drew from the work of Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. In doing so, he developed a fascinating account of the commonplace rituals that pervade daily interaction and their significance for constructing and presenting an

individual's self. Arlie Hochschild's work bears the imprint of Goffman but incorporates a focus on a crucial, though often neglected, aspect of social life: emotions. Additionally, she brings within her purview an examination of gender and family dynamics in contemporary capitalist society. In [chapter 13](#), we discuss *phenomenology*, a perspective that, akin to exchange theory and symbolic interactionism, focuses not on political, economic, and social institutions at the macro level but on the everyday world of the individual (see [Figure 1.12](#)). We begin the chapter by focusing on the work of **Alfred Schutz** and of **Peter Berger** and **Thomas Luckmann**. You will see that, akin to symbolic interactionists, phenomenologists explore the subjective categories behind and within which everyday life revolves; that is, phenomenologists too are profoundly interested in interpretation and *meaning*, reflecting an emphasis on the nonrational realm (see [Figure 1.12](#)). However, much more so than symbolic interactionism, phenomenology is devoted to explaining how it is that even indirect and anonymous interactions are sustained by “intersubjectivity,” or shared meaning. We conclude this chapter by examining the work of feminist **Dorothy E. Smith**, who incorporates elements of neo-Marxism into her phenomenological and ethnomethodological approach.

In [chapters 14](#) and [15](#), we turn to two interrelated perspectives that developed in the 1960s: [poststructuralism](#) and [postmodernism](#). Though these thinkers cover a broad range of topics and disciplines, the common denominator among them is that they all question claims about the “truth” of social reality to some degree. We begin in [chapter 14](#) by focusing on the work of **Michel Foucault**, who is commonly identified as a chief progenitor of poststructuralist theory, as well as one of the most influential intellectuals of the twentieth century. Although Foucault died in 1984, his work still reverberates throughout many scholarly fields (e.g., history, philosophy, literary criticism, feminist studies, psychology, gay and lesbian studies, and sociology) and has become an important reference point for activists around the world. We then turn to the work of the French sociologist **Pierre Bourdieu**, who dominated French public intellectual life during the 1980s and 1990s. Bourdieu's work provocatively combines an emphasis on the reproduction of class relations with an awareness that perceptions are dependent not on the external world, per se, but rather on the point of view from which one apprehends the world. In doing so, his work is rooted in an explicit attempt to create a multidimensional theoretical framework. We conclude [chapter 14](#) with a discussion of postcolonial theory and the work of writer **Edward Said**, whose analysis of the social and cultural construction of the “Oriental” continues to provoke debate throughout the social sciences and the humanities today.

The two philosophers whose work you will read in [chapter 15](#)—**Jean Baudrillard** and **Judith Butler**—take the questioning of “reality” even further by emphasizing how all knowledge, including science, is a representation of reality and is not reality itself. Postmodernists, generally speaking, dismiss theoretical frameworks (including the one we use in this book) as misguided and “essentializing”; that is, to them, theoretical models reduce the fluidity and indeterminateness of the social world into fixed categories. We first focus on the work of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who contends that “reality” has completely given way to a simulation of reality, or *hyperreality*, because simulated experience has replaced the “real.” We then examine the work of prominent American philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler, who challenges the very binary categories that we use to think about both gender and sexual orientation. For Butler, gender identity is nothing more than an unstable “fiction.”

We conclude this book with an examination of various theories pertaining to contemporary *global society*. As you will see, while the works of **Immanuel Wallerstein**, **Anthony Giddens**, **Ulrich Beck**, and **George Ritzer** are quite distinct, these theorists all focus not on the dynamics of interpersonal interaction or the forces that give form to a single society, per se, but rather on how social life is embedded in a global context, and how what happens in any given country or geographical zone is a function of its interconnections with other geographical regions. With an increasingly unrestricted flow of economic capital and cultural images across countries, and the increasing porousness of national boundaries that this flow promotes, these theorists underscore how the “distant” and the “near” are not so far apart.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the difference between “primary” and “secondary” theoretical sources. What are the advantages and disadvantages of reading each type of work?
2. Using [Table 1.1](#) as a reference, devise your own question, and then give hypothetical answers that reflect the four basic theoretical orientations: individual/rational, individual/nonrational, collective/rational, and collective/nonrational. For instance, why do 16-year-olds stay in or drop out of school? Why might a man or woman stay in a situation of domestic violence? What are possible explanations for gender inequality? Why are you reading this book?
3. Numerous works of fiction speak to the social conditions that early sociologists were examining. For instance, Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) portrays the hardships of the Industrial Revolution, while Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862/1979) addresses the political and social dynamics of the French Revolution. Read either of these works, or watch the movies or plays based on them, and discuss the tremendous social changes they highlight.
4. One’s answers to the questions of order and action have methodological as well as theoretical implications. Theories, after all, should be testable through the use of empirical data. Particularly with regard to the question of order, the perspective one adopts will have an important bearing on what counts as evidence and how to collect it. Consider both an individualist and collectivist perspective: How might you design a research project studying the causes and effects of job outsourcing, or the causes and effects of affirmative action? How about a study of the causes and effects of the rising costs of college tuition, or the causes and effects of drug and alcohol abuse? What types of questions or data would be most relevant for each approach? How would you collect the answers to these questions? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with each approach?
5. Consider the alleged conversation between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway:
F. Scott Fitzgerald: “The rich are different than you and me.”
E. Hemingway: “Yes, they have more money.”
How does this brief exchange relate to the metatheoretical framework used in this book? Use concrete examples to explain.
6. Consider the following famous quote attributed to John Stuart Mill:
“One person with a belief is equal to a force of 99 who have only interests.”
How does this quote relate to the metatheoretical framework used in this book? Use concrete examples to explain. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Mill? How so?