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1 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY IN THE GLOBAL AGE

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1.1 Identify the purpose of sociology.

1.2 Discuss ways to become a good sociologist.

1.3 Describe how sociologists understand continuity and change, particularly in the context of the sociological imagination and the social construction of reality.

1.4 Evaluate how sociology relates to other social sciences and how sociological knowledge differs from common sense.

1.5 Explain why sociologists today focus on globalization, consumption, McDonaldization, and the digital world.

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WHY STUDY SOCIOLOGY?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How do we know social rules? And why do we know (or not) when we have broken them?

- Why are certain identities praised while others are treated so poorly?

- How are race and ethnicity understood, and understood differently, in different societies?

- What does it mean when we say that gender and sexuality are social constructs?

- What does the institution of religion mean for society?

- How does the educational level of our parents impact our own socialization into the world?

- How do medical issues intersect with social issues, especially during the age of COVID-19?

- How does what we buy shape how others see us?

- Does capitalism really work better than socialism or communism?

- What is the relationship between media and politics?

- Why is Taylor Swift so popular around the world?

- Why are so many people poor and so few people rich?

- What have the last several years of the global COVID-19 pandemic meant for how we understand our social world?

Sociology can help us answer all of these questions, and more! Sociology can help us better understand the world around us, how it works, why it works that way, and even to better understand who we are and why we think the way we do, act the way we do, and live the way we do. This textbook will help you better understand sociology, the world around you, and also, hopefully, yourself.

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology can be defined as the systematic study of the ways in which people are affected by and affect the social structures and social processes associated with the groups, organizations, cultures, societies, and world in which they exist. If that definition sounds a bit complicated for now, don't worry. In this textbook we will be exploring what all of those concepts mean.

One of the most important lessons you will learn in your study of sociology is that what you think and do as an individual is affected by what is happening in groups, organizations, cultures, societies, and the world. This is especially true of social changes, even those that are global in scope and seem at

first glance to be remote from you. At the same time, you are not only affected by larger events but also capable, to some degree, of having an impact on large-scale structures and processes. This is an example of the **butterfly effect** (Lorenz 1995). Although this concept is generally applied to physical phenomena, it also applies to social phenomena. The idea is that a relatively small change in a specific location can have far-ranging, even global, effects over both time and distance. For example, when countries change their trade or labor policies, it can be a trigger for corporations to move in, or out, of those countries. This can affect employment opportunities in both the receiving and the host country. Wars, invasions, and civil conflict can also spark global impacts. For example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to a change in energy and food prices in many countries. It has also impacted the way resources have been distributed within countries, most notably political attention and military funding. Celebrities and influencers also exert a great deal of power. For example, when Oprah recommends a book it tends to become an overnight best seller, and when videos go viral on social media, especially TikTok, it can lead to changes in fashion, behavior, and even eating habits by individuals around the world. Perhaps the trajectory of your own life and career will be affected by one of these examples. More important, it is very possible that actions you take in your lifetime will have wide-ranging, perhaps global, effects.

Will our highways be safer and injury rates lower because of the sensors in self-driving cars like this one? Or will we have more air pollution and therefore more illness because there will be so many self-driving cars on the road? Sociologists assess the so-called butterfly effects of changes like driverless cars.

ROSLAN RAHMAN/AFP/Getty Images

Sociology certainly deals with contemporary phenomena, but its deep historical roots have led to many longer-term interests. In the fourteenth century, the Muslim scholar Abdel Rahman Ibn Khaldun studied various social relationships, including those between politics and economics. He was arguably one of the world's first widely influential sociologists. Of special importance to the founding of sociology as a formal academic discipline was the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution. During this industrial age, many early sociologists concentrated on factories, the production that took place in those settings, and those who worked there, especially blue-collar, manual-labor workers. Sociologists also came to focus on the relationship between industry and the rest of society, including, for example, the state and the family.

By the middle of the twentieth century, manufacturing in the United States and many other countries was in the early stages of a long decline that continues to this day. (However, manufacturing in other parts of the world, most notably in China, is booming.) Those countries had moved from the

industrial age to the "postindustrial age" (Bell 1973; Leicht and Fitzgerald 2006). In the United States, as well as in the Western world more generally, the center of the economy and the attention of many sociologists shifted from the factory to the office. That is, the focus moved from blue-collar, manual-labor work to white-collar office work (Mills 1951) as well as to the bureaucracies in which many people worked (Clegg and Lounsbury 2009; Weber [1921] 1968). Another change in the postindustrial age was the growth of the service sector of the economy, involving everyone from high-status service providers such as physicians and lawyers to lower-status workers behind the counters of fast-food restaurants and now those who drive for Uber or Lyft.

The more recent rise of the "information age" (Castells 2010; Kline 2015) can be seen as a part, or an extension, of the postindustrial age. Knowledge and information are critical in today's world. So, too, are the technologies—computers, smartphones, the internet—that have greatly increased the productivity of individual workers and altered the nature of their work. Rather than designers drawing designs by hand, computer-assisted technologies are now used to create designs for everything from electric power grids to patterned fabrics. The widespread use of smartphones has enabled, among many other things, the rise of companies such as Uber and Lyft, the success of which is threatening the rental car industry and especially the taxicab industry and the livelihoods of many taxi drivers (who are also threatened by driverless cars). Some of the drivers work a few hours a day for these services in search of a little extra money, while others work full-time for the services. Their willingness to do this work has reduced the need for taxicabs and full-time taxi drivers.

More generally, less and less work occurs in the office because the computer and the internet now allow many people, at least those with access to such technologies, to work from anywhere. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated this trend (Ryan and Nanda 2023c). Many are also increasingly part of the "gig economy" meaning that they are temporary workers handling a number of short-term jobs ("gigs") rather than working fulltime for an organization.

However, it is not just work that has been affected by new technologies. Uber is part of the growing "sharing economy" (Sundararajan 2016), in which people share (for a fee) many things; most notably, some share their homes through websites such as Airbnb.com. One key component of this new technological world, Google, is so powerful that a 2011 book is titled *The Googlization of Everything* (Vaidhyanathan 2011). Thus, much sociological attention has shifted to computers and the internet, including social media, as well as those who work with them (Lynch 2016; Scholz 2013).

From his home in Israel, this wine expert is giving a presentation on the Israeli wine industry to a group of British journalists via Zoom. In the information age, much work can be performed anywhere, using a computer and the internet.

David Silverman/Getty Images

The transition from the industrial to the postindustrial and now to the information age has important personal implications. Had you been a man who lived in the industrial age, you would have worked (if you could find a job) for money (pay). You would have done so to be able to buy what you needed and wanted. Women working in the private sphere were largely uncompensated or compensated at a lower rate, as is often still the case. However, in the postindustrial age, it is increasingly likely that nearly all people will be willing, or forced, to work part time or even for free (Anderson 2009; Dusi 2017; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), as in the case of many interns, bloggers, and contributors to YouTube, TikTok, and Wikipedia.

You may be willing to perform free labor because you enjoy it and because much of what is important in your life is, in any case, available for free on the internet. There is no need for you to buy newspapers when blogs are free. Similarly, there is no need buy CDs when music is streamed free on various internet sites or inexpensively by Spotify. Why buy or rent DVDs when movies can be downloaded, or viewed, at no cost or inexpensively from the internet (from Netflix, for example)? However, although all of this, and much else, is available for free (or at very low cost), the problem is that the essentials of life—food, shelter, clothing—still cost money, lots of money.

Many hope that the labor they currently perform for free will eventually have an economic payoff. One person (known as PewDiePie) played video games on YouTube. By early 2023, he had garnered more than 110 million subscribers and 29 billion views. He has earned millions of dollars for essentially just playing video games. In fact, playing video games has become big business—one tournament drew 11,000 fans to a stadium and offered $11 million in prize money. Many hope that their work as bloggers or on YouTube will lead to full-time jobs, although that happens for very, very few.

These are a few of the many social changes to be discussed in this book. The essential point is that the social world (people, groups, organizations, and so on)—*your* social world—is continually changing. Sociology is a field that is, and must be, constantly attuned to and involved in studying those changes.

BECOMING A GOOD SOCIOLOGIST

A common complaint of many sociologists is that everyone thinks they are a sociologist. To some extent, that is true. Everyone is capable of observing the social world around them and analyzing it. That said, studying sociology is about gaining certain knowledge (as you will do in this book) and, most important, about gaining certain skills in observation and analysis of the social world. A **professional sociologist** is someone who has a deep body of knowledge about the social world and a refined skill set to better analyze that world. This text will be an introduction to helping you start building that knowledge and developing those skills.

It is important to understand the difference between a fact and an opinion. A **fact** is a piece of knowledge about the world that can be proven by scientific methods. For example, that the earth is round is a scientific fact. An **opinion** is a perspective of a particular individual or group that is based on feelings or beliefs with or without any scientific evidence to support it. For example, that Taylor Swift is the greatest singer of all time is an opinion. Opinions make for interesting conversations on a first date or at a party but do little to help us understand how the world "really" is. And here enters sociology.

Sociologists all have opinions. We are, after all, also people and have our own individual set of experiences, beliefs, and individual viewpoints. That said, a professional sociologist attempts to put those personalized individual things aside in order to better understand how *society* works. There are more than 8 billion human beings on the planet, with an incredible variety of languages, religions, politics, and beliefs. Sociologists value each of those individuals, but they are most interested in the society, that is, the broader collective of individuals and how they relate to one another.

Sociologists also understand that facts can change. An immediate question, then, should be how can something that is scientifically proven change? The simple answer is that as our means of better understanding the world improve, so can, and likely will, what we know about. For example, during most of recorded human history it was considered a fact that the earth is flat. There was no way to conceive of it being a big sphere (wouldn't we all fall off?). But as scientific methods improved, we came to

understand that the world is, in fact, round. Many things that human beings have long assumed to be facts have been altered as knowledge improves. For example, the invention of the microscope allowed us to see viruses and bacteria, a discovery that radically changed how we think about our bodies and our health and revolutionized the field of medicine.

Sociologists face a particular challenge in that the social world, unlike the physical universe, does not really operate on "facts." We cannot invent a device that can prove that capitalism is better or worse than socialism. There is no machine that can show us which political system is best. There is no one "right" answer to questions of abortion, gun control, or immigration. Instead, sociologists rely on using scientific methods to collect evidence about the social world to arrive at conclusions that are scientifically informed. For example, a sociologist could look at rates of gun ownership in a given country and compare them to homicide rates, suicide rates, and gun deaths caused by accident. They could then compare those rates between different countries and come to reasonable conclusions about the impact of gun ownership on number of deaths caused by guns. Further, they could then examine different social and cultural phenomena that might help to explain expected (and even *un*expected) differences in rates.

One major challenge for a sociologist is finding ways to provide evidence that do not rely on personal opinions or beliefs. A good sociologist wants to understand the social world, not just their own personal world. The word "sociology," after all, has its roots in the word "social." One way to do this is to work to overcome limitations of everyday thinking, to find ways to not let our personal beliefs influence our findings and observations. Below are some common limitations of everyday thinking and some strategies to overcome them.

- *Relying on "common sense."* We have probably all questioned something that we didn't understand and been told that the answer is just "common sense." For example, that you are supposed to act in a certain way, or go to college to "get ahead," or sleep at certain hours are all considered "common sense." But what exactly does that mean? Who's sense is it that gets made "common"? A sociologist seeks to question "common sense" and understand if there is any evidence to support it. For example, is college really the best way to "get ahead"? Well, evidence shows that salaries do, in fact, increase up to the level of having a master's degree and then they commonly decline after getting a PhD. Why? Again, evidence suggests that many MAs work in the private sector (which is generally better paid), but many PhDs work in the academic sector (which is relatively poorer paid in terms of education level required to get the job). We also see that many of the world's richest people, like Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg, never graduated from college. And many people who have graduated from college are very poor. Why is this the case if "common sense" tells us that education is the best way to "get ahead"? A sociologists will seek out evidence, including why there are exceptions to that evidence (like Gates or Zuckerberg), to better understand the value of education as it relates to economic prosperity. In this way, evidence can be used to better understand why a certain idea is considered "common sense," but also to provide nuance to it.

- *Assuming "our" world is "the" world.* We all live in bubbles. We cannot be in all places with all people at all times. And so, generally speaking, we tend to live in bubbles of people like ourselves. We likely live in neighborhoods with people who are close to us in terms of how much money they have. We probably have friends with similar education levels (it is likely that many of your friends are also students). We are likely to more frequently associate with people of the same religion and, often, political beliefs. That said, the way we live, however that is, is not the way most people live. More important, we are rarely exposed in any meaningful way to people who do not live the way we do. Most college students spend most of their time around professors and other college students, and most (statistically speaking) have parents who also went to college. They might, therefore, assume that most people go to college or have college degrees. Yet only about 7 percent of the world's population has a college degree. Our personal experience, whatever that is, is not usually the "reality" for most people. That said, a sociologist does not discount personal experience, but rather seeks to collect a lot of personal experiences to get a better understanding of the *social* (there's that word again!) experience.

- *Believing that the way things are now is the way they always have been, and always will be.* We often assume that the world has always been the way it is now. It might be difficult for many college students to imagine that their professors most likely spent their childhoods without the internet, or even a computer. There was no widespread social media in the twentieth century. Most people in their 40s have listened to cassette tapes, watched VHS tapes, and used a card catalogue at the library. We can go back even further (but not by much) to say that if you had been born 100 years earlier, you would not have had a television in your house (such a thing didn't exist). You would not have been able to fly anywhere (there were no commercial planes). You couldn't have taken an antibiotic (also not invented yet). And nearly 20 percent of all the earth's land would have been controlled by Great Britain. That's a lot of change in a short period of time! And although 100 years might sound like a long time, your parents knew people who were alive then.

  We can safely say that society is changing, as it always has. Some even argue that society is changing faster now than ever and that changes are happening at speeds that we can barely keep up with. The internet revolution has certainly transformed society in ways that we still do not understand. As has air travel. As have antibiotics. As have light bulbs (which are not even 150 years old yet). The world changes.

  On the other side, some scientists believe that the first person who will live to be 200 years old has already been born. It is likely that many of you will live to see human beings on Mars, while many of your grandparents remember when we first landed on the moon. The world has changed. It is changing. And it will continue to change. We cannot assume that the way things are is the way they always have been, or always will be. A good sociologist will understand that and seek to understand why these changes are happening, and, more important, what they mean for society.

- *Accepting authority without question.* Most of us are taught from a young age to accept what we are told and not to ask too many questions. We are told that our parents, our religious leaders, our political leaders, even our professors should never be questioned. Such unconditional acceptance of what authority figures say limits our ability to better understand the world around us. And for every authority figure you find who says one thing, you can certainly find many more who will say something completely different. So what is a person to do?

Many of us live in our own "bubbles," and associate frequently with people who share similar backgrounds, beliefs, and life experiences. Thinking sociologically requires that we look beyond personal experience to gain a broader understanding of the larger social world.

Julian J Rossig/ iStock Photos

It is important to emphasize that sociology does not teach that we should always question every single thing that we are told by every single person who tells it to us, or to assume that everyone is lying or trying to manipulate us. This is not what sociology is about. It is, however, about learning skills to be able to critically think for ourselves and to evaluate evidence (including what others claim to be "true" or "common sense"). It is unlikely that your parents are purposefully lying to you. Or that your college professor is trying to teach you to think in only one certain way. That said, a good sociologist will question what gives someone the authority to speak and, more important, to be able to evaluate for themselves whether what they are being told is based in evidence or reason. Sociology is not about indoctrination. It is about learning critical thinking skills. If you are expected to believe something, then there should be evidence to do so. Otherwise, why believe one thing and not another?

- *Biased and selective observation.* The internet can be a valuable tool to help us do research. It is a great, fast, way to help us find information. That said, the internet is uncontrolled and full of as much bad information as it is good (probably more!). Whatever answer you want to find, you can certainly find on the internet. There are a number of websites that will tell you that the earth is flat. There are perhaps just as many that will tell you that COVID-19 is a hoax. Neither of these things is true according to the material world in which we all live. So with all of the information out there, how can we know what is true?

   We need to be able to develop our own critical thinking skills and to rely on evidence rather than opinion. To paraphrase a popular saying, when someone has a hammer, the world looks full of nails. In other words, we often find the answers that we are looking for because we lack the skills to differentiate between what is "good" information (i.e., based in science and reason) and what is "bad" information (i.e., based in opinion, bias, or discrimination). Sociology can help you learn how to become less biased and better observers.

- *Thinking in definitive terms.* We have a tendency in everyday thinking and conversation to use words like "never" and "always," or "of course," "proves," and "should." Sociologists generally try to avoid these kinds of terms as there are few things that fit those categories. For example, there are few things that never happen (people still die of the Black Plague every year!) or that always happen (not even taxes!). It is also difficult to prove that anything happens 100 percent of the time for 100 percent of people in 100 percent of places (the social sciences, like sociology, work different than the physical sciences, like physics—more on that below). We should also avoid using terms like "of course." That implies that something is understood to be the same for all people in all places under all circumstances and, again, that rarely happens. We might say that "of course" some people will be poor while others are rich, and yet we have bountiful examples of when that hasn't been the case and no reason to assume that it has to be that way or that it always will be. Similarly, the word "should" implies a moral judgment. That one has the right, and only, answer. Sociologists generally try to avoid making such moral judgments (although that is debated among sociologists, as we will see) or implying that one person knows what is best for everyone else.

   Instead, as good sociologists, we can use the following:
   - Instead of "never" or "always," try using "under these circumstances."
   - Instead of "proves," try using "suggests" or "indicates."
   - Instead of "should," try using "could."
   - Instead of "all" or "every," try using "most" or "a majority."
   - Instead of "of course," try using "according to" or "as evidence suggests."

   The above said, there will be times when definitive terms are perhaps the most appropriate. For example, it is true (at least for now) that human beings "always" die. The question for sociologists in that case isn't so much the "always" as the why, when, how, and especially the inequalities in those answers.

Tips for Critical Thinking

One of the most important skills of becoming a good sociologist is to fine tune our critical thinking skills. We have already outlined several ways that we can improve our critical thinking skills, but let's add a couple of more to the list:

- *Don't assume; ask questions!* The task of any scientist, including a social scientist like a sociologist, is to investigate the world. Rather than make assumptions about how the world operates, we want to rely on observation, evidence, and analysis. In order to do that, a good sociologist will find as much joy in questions as they do in answers.

- *Be prepared to be wrong and to have your understanding of the world, and yourself, challenged.* The main point of education is to learn. The reason we seek to learn is so that we know more. Nobody knows everything but by educating ourselves we can start to learn more than we did. In order to learn, however, we must be prepared to have been wrong about what we thought we already knew. For example, many children around the world are taught that there is a fairy princess who will collect our teeth when they fall out and exchange them for money or gifts. The "tooth fairy" is a common mythology in many societies. As we grow older, we learn that such a person does not exist. As adults, we must be open to having our beliefs challenged in a similar kind of way. It can be quite challenging to have our assumptions and beliefs about the world questioned. At the same time, it can also be quite liberating as it allows us to think in different ways, and, perhaps more important, to better understand why we think the way we do.

- *Question the "ordinary."* Some of the most profound sociological insights have come from questioning, or examining, everyday situations. For example, great sociological insights have been gained by carefully analyzing such everyday events as conversations between friends at dinner or even just riding an elevator. By questioning everyday interactions, we can learn more about why they are considered so ordinary.

- *Ask questions!* This repeats the first point, but is worth repeating. Ask questions! As sociologists, it is our job to try to better understand the world around us. In order to better understand something, we first need to question it. If someone tells you something but cannot tell you why what they told you is "true," then you should begin to question that. We can also question why certain reasons are given, if there are motivations of the person telling us things to do so, and to think outside the box about the way the world could be (and whether we even want it to be that way).

The Sociological Imagination

The systematic study of the social world has always required imagination on the part of sociologists. There are various ways to look at the social world. For example, instead of looking at the world from the point of view of an insider, one can, at least psychologically, place oneself outside that world. The political (and sometimes even physical) attacks against immigrants might make sense to some, but if you imagine yourself in the place of an innocent child whose parents brought them to a different country seeking a better life, you might see things differently. As another example, the sanctions being placed against Russia as a country might make sense from a global state perspective, but it is having horrendous impacts on innocent Russians, many of whom are also opposed to the invasion of Ukraine, but who are nonetheless being cut off from many essential supplies because of global sanctions.

The phenomenon of being able to look at the social world from different, imaginative perspectives attracted the attention of the famous sociologist C. Wright Mills, who in 1959 wrote a very important book titled *The Sociological Imagination.* He argued that sociologists have a unique perspective—the **sociological imagination**—that gives them a distinctive way of looking at data or reflecting on the world around them (Selwyn 2015).
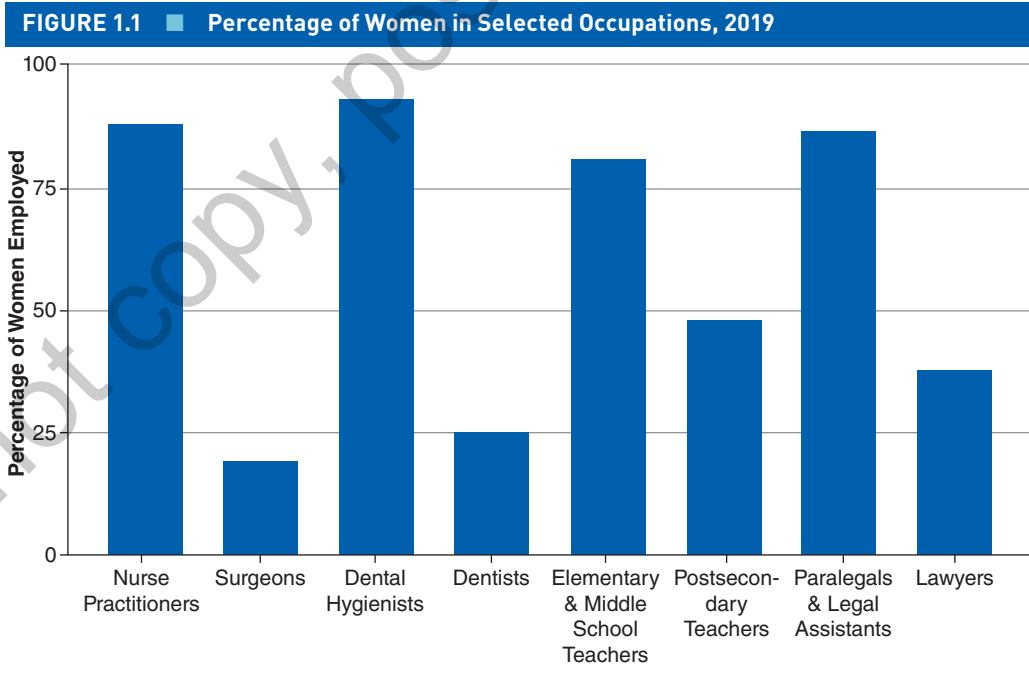
The sociological imagination may be most useful in helping sociologists see the linkage between private troubles and public issues. For example, ADHD—attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder—can easily be seen as a private trouble. For years there was little public awareness of ADHD, and those who had it were likely to suffer alone. But since the 1980s, it has become clear that ADHD is also a public issue, and it is becoming an increasingly important one in many societies. It is clear that many people suffer from ADHD: The number of children in the United States alone ages 3 to 17 ever diagnosed with ADHD increased from 4.4 million in 2003 to more than 6 million in 2019 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2022), which creates a number of larger issues for schools, employers, and society as a whole. The fact that it has become a public issue may make ADHD less of a private trouble for some, as there is now greater public understanding of the problem and many more support groups are available.

Another example of the relationship between private troubles and public issues relates to the fact that women are more likely than men to be concentrated in lower-paying jobs (see Figure 1.1; Field 2018). For example, women are much more likely to be comparatively poorly paid dental hygienists than dentists or legal assistants rather than lawyers. Being limited occupationally creates personal troubles for many women, such as inadequate income and job dissatisfaction. This is also a public issue, not only because the discrepancy between the genders is unfair to women as a whole but also because society is not benefiting from the many contributions women could be making.

C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) was a prominent post–World War II sociologist who urged the use of the "sociological imagination" to study issues of concern to sociology . . . and to you.

Archive Photos/Getty Images

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Percentage of Women in Selected Occupations, 2019

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019.

The decision to pursue one college major or career path over another could become a private trouble if a student makes a poor choice or has one forced on him or her. Sociologists have also shown that such choices are very much related to larger public issues. If many people make poor choices, or are forced into them—as women and other minorities often are—this will lead to public issues such as widespread job dissatisfaction and poor performance on the job. Culturally based ideas about gender often shape personal preferences in choosing a college major, and gendered beliefs about career competence

steer women and men toward some types of jobs and away from others (Speer 2017). Being in a poorly paid and unsatisfying job is a personal trouble for an individual, but it is a public issue when large numbers of people find themselves in this situation.

The Micro–Macro Relationship

The interest in personal troubles and public issues is a specific example of a larger and more basic sociological concern with the relationship between small-scale (**micro**) social phenomena, such as individuals and their thoughts and actions, and large-scale (**macro**) social phenomena, such as groups, organizations, cultures, society, and the world, as well as the relationships among them. Karl Marx, often considered one of the earliest and most important sociologists, was interested in the relationship between what workers do and think (micro issues) and the capitalist economic system in which the workers exist (a macro issue). To take a more contemporary example, Randall Collins (2009) has sought to develop a theory of violence that deals with everything from individuals skilled in violent interactions, such as attacking those who are weak, to the material resources needed by violent organizations to cause the destruction of other violent organizations. An example of the former type of violent organization is the well-equipped U.S. Navy SEALs team that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011 and through that act helped hasten the decline of al-Qaeda. However, the decline of al-Qaeda helped lead to the rise of a new, even more violent, organization, the Islamic State.

In fact, a continuum runs from the most microscopic to the most macroscopic of social realities, with phenomena at roughly the midpoint of this continuum best thought of as **meso** (middle or intermediate) realities. The definition of sociology presented at the beginning of this chapter fits this continuum quite well. Individual actions and thoughts lie on the micro end of the continuum; groups, organizations, cultures, and societies fall more toward the macro end; and worldwide structures and processes are at the end point on the macro side of the continuum. Although in their own work the vast majority of individual sociologists focus on only very limited segments of this continuum, the field as a whole is concerned with the continuum in its entirety, as well as with the interrelationships among its various components.

Members of Patriot Front, a White supremacist group, clash with protesters during a march in Boston. Sociologists study violence by examining the thoughts and motivations of violent individuals, as well as the larger social forces that support them.

MediaNews Group / Boston Herald via Getty Images

The Agency–Structure Relationship

Many sociologists tend to think in terms of the micro–macro relationship. The agency–structure continuum is another complex set of relationships, but for our purposes we can think of agency as resembling the micro level and structure as resembling the macro level.

The utility of the agency–structure terminology is that it highlights several important social realities and aspects of the field of sociology. Of greatest significance is the fact that the term *agency* gives great importance to the individual—the "agent"—as having power and a capacity for creativity (Giddens 1984). In sociological work on agency, great emphasis is placed on the individual's mental abilities and the ways in which these abilities are used to create important, if not decisive, actions.

However, individual agents are seen as enmeshed in macro-level social and cultural structures that they create and by which they are constrained (King 2004). For example, as a student, you help create the universities you attend, but you are also constrained by them and the power they have over you. Your university can require you to do certain things (such as take specific courses in order to earn your degree) and prevent you from doing other things (such as taking courses that might be of greater interest or even taking no courses at all). On the other hand, you as a student can act to change or overthrow those structures. You might organize student-run groups on topics of interest, such as religious rights or manga cartoons, attract many participants to the groups, and eventually prompt the university to add courses on those topics. Or perhaps you might organize students to stop enrolling in an elective course that seems irrelevant to their lives, causing that elective to be dropped from the course catalog.

Agents (you as a student, in this case) have great power. In the words of another important sociologist, Erving Goffman (1961b), individuals are **dangerous giants**. That is, they have the potential to disrupt and destroy the structures in which they find themselves. Yet often agents do not realize the power they possess. As a result, social structures such as the university and the class you are currently taking function for long periods of time with little or no disruption by individual agents.

However, there are times, such as during the Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when students come to realize that they are dangerous giants and act to change not only the university but also the larger society (Gitlin 1993). For example, students at some universities are protesting against the possible deportation of undocumented immigrants by pressuring school administrators to create "sanctuary campuses" that protect faculty, students, and staff from federal immigration authorities. Another example is the recent rise in protests, especially organized walk outs, to protest environmental issues.

There are far more minor, everyday actions that reflect the fact that people can be dangerous giants. Examples involving students include questioning a professor's argument or going to the dean to protest the excessive absences of an instructor. However, most people most of the time do not realize that they are dangerous giants—that they have the capacity to alter greatly the social structures that surround them and in which they are enmeshed.

Students across the world have organized to challenge the social and political structures seen as abetting the process of global climate change.

Erik McGregor/Getty Images

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The discussion of agency and structure leads to another basic concept in sociology: the **social construction of reality** (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Knoblauch and Wilke 2016). People at the agency end of the continuum are seen as creating social reality, basically macro-level phenomena, through their thoughts and actions. That reality then comes to have a life of its own. That is, it becomes a structure that is partly or wholly separate from the people who created it and exist in it. Once macro phenomena have lives of their own, they constrain and even control what people do. Of course, people can refuse to accept these constraints and controls and create new social realities. This process of individual creation of structural realities, constraints, and coercion then begins anew, in a continuing loop. It is this continuous loop that is the heart of agency–structure and micro–macro relationships, the social world, and the field of sociology.

For example, in the realm of consumption, it is people—as designers, manufacturers, consumers, and bloggers—who create the world of fashion (Entwhistle 2015; Mair 2018). However, once the fashion world comes into existence, that world has a great deal of influence over the social constructions, especially the tastes, of individuals who purchase the fashions it produces. Famous fashion houses such as Dior and Givenchy dominate the industry and perpetuate their existence through continual fashion changes. These companies—and, more important, the "fast-fashion" companies that copy and mass-produce their products, such as H&M, Forever 21, and Zara—control people's tastes in fashion and thereby the nature of the clothing they buy and wear. Changing fashions are highly profitable for the companies involved. Consumers are led to be eager to buy the latest fashions, although most often in the form of relatively inexpensive fast-fashion knockoffs.

Of course, many people do not accept such social constructions; they do not go along with the constraints of the fashion industry. They do not wear what the industry wants them to wear, and they do not change the way they dress because of changes in fashion induced by the fashion industry. Many people have their own sense of fashion and create their own way of dressing. Others ignore fashion altogether. Of greatest importance from this perspective is the fact that the idea of what is in fashion often comes not from the fashion industry but rather from the ways of dressing that people put together themselves. These people, in a real sense, construct their own social reality. In fact, in a process known as "cool hunting" (Gloor and Cooper 2007), scouts for the fashion industry seek out new and interesting ways of dressing, often focusing on what young people in the suburbs and the inner cities are wearing. They bring those innovative ideas back to the fashion industry, and some of them are turned into next year's fashions.

Understanding Social Constructionism

Let's have a pop quiz (sorry!).

Which of the following is true?

  a. The world is flat.

  b. There are seven continents on Earth.

  c. Chewing gum in public is a crime.

  d. There are eight planets in our solar system.

The answer? All of the above. And none of the above! How is that possible? The answer lies in the fundamental sociological concept of social constructionism.

The world actually isn't flat. We know that thanks to advances in science and technology. That said, for most of recorded human history, most people thought that it was flat. So whether (a) is true depends on *when you are asking the question*.

Many in the United States are taught that there are seven continents (North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, Antarctica). For many in South America, there are six continents (North America and South America are simply known as "Americas"). The same is true for many in Central Asia, although they learn a different set of continents (North America and South America are different, but Europe and Asia are combined into "Eurasia"). So whether (b) is true depends on *who you are asking*.

Chewing gum in public is probably not a crime where you live, but it is a crime in Singapore. Understanding of crime and deviance and socially acceptable behavior varies. So whether (c) is true depends on *where you are*.

Scientists today agree that there are eight planets in our solar system. Many of you were probably taught that. But when Pluto was first discovered in 1930, it was considered the ninth planet and didn't lose that title until scientists reclassified how we define a planet in 2006. Thus, for 76 years there were nine planets. Now there are eight. So whether (d) is true depends on *scientific classification*.

All of the above should lead us to wonder why we should believe anything at all. Does science mean anything? The answer is yes! And, paradoxically, what makes science so valuable is that it can change and be questioned. That is what sociology is all about! However, there are better, and worse, ways to find answers to our questions. Sociology is also about learning that difference.

Social Structures and Processes

A nineteenth-century sociologist, Auguste Comte, was the first person to formally use the term *sociology* in 1839. Crucial for our purposes here is his early distinction between what he called "social statics" and "social dynamics." In his social statics, Comte looked at the various "parts" (structures) of society, such as the manufacturers and retailers of clothing fashions, and the ways in which they relate to one another as well as to the whole of society. In examining such relationships, Comte investigated social processes among and between parts of society as well as in society as a whole. However, under the heading of social dynamics, his main focus was on a specific social process—social change—and how the various parts of society change.

It is important to emphasize that **social structures** are enduring and regular social arrangements, such as the family and the state. Although social structures do change, they are generally not very dynamic; they change very slowly. **Social processes** are the dynamic and ever-changing aspects of the social world.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) invented the term *sociology,* argued that the discipline should be a science, and created a general theory of the social world.

The elements of globalization can be divided between structures (e.g., the United Nations) and a variety of more specific social processes (e.g., the migration of people across national borders). In terms of consumption, we can think of the shopping mall (or Amazon) as a structure and the shopping (or consumption) that takes place in it as a process. Finally, the internet as a whole and social networking sites in particular are structures, while the communication and the social interaction that take place in them can be viewed as processes.

Needless to say, neither the shopping mall nor the internet existed in Comte's day. Once again, we see that the social world is constantly changing and that sociologists, as well as students of sociology, must be sensitive to those changes. However, some of sociology's earliest concepts continue to be applicable, and usefully applied, to the social world.

Sociology's Purpose: Science or Social Reform? Or Both?

Comte was famous not only for examining the relationship between structure and process but also for arguing that such study ought to be scientific. He believed that the social world was dominated by laws and that sociology's task was to uncover those laws. As those laws were uncovered, the science of sociology would develop. But Comte was also concerned about the problems of his day and interested in solving them through social reform. In fact, to Comte, science and reform should not be separated from one another. A number of classical sociologists—Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Jane Addams, and others—shared this view. Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) was not only a commentary on the social ills of the capitalist economy but also a rallying cry to workers to organize and abolish capitalism.

Many of today's sociologists study social problems of all sorts, such as poverty and crime. They use a variety of scientific methods to collect large amounts of data on such problems. Many also seek to use what they learn about those problems to suggest ways of reforming society. They believe that these two activities—scientific research and social reform—are not necessarily distinct; they can and should be mutually enriching. Although many contemporary sociologists accept this position, a division has developed over time, with some sociologists focusing more on scientific research and others more engaged in activities designed to reform society and address social problems.

The sociologists who engage in "pure science" operate with the conviction that we need to have a better understanding of how the social world operates before we can change it, if that's what we want to do. The knowledge gained through social research may ultimately be used by those who want to change society, or to keep it as it is, but that is not the immediate concern of these researchers.

Other sociologists take the opposite position. C. Wright Mills, for example, was little interested in doing scientific research. He was mostly interested in such social reforms as limiting or eliminating the unwholesome and worrisome ties between the military and industry in the United States. He was also critical of many of the most prominent sociologists of his day for their orientation toward being pure scientists, their lack of concern for the pressing problems of the day, and their unwillingness to do anything about those problems. Feminist sociologists have extended the argument, pointing out that the topics and methods of objective, scientific sociology themselves sometimes reflect, and ultimately reinforce, social inequality along the lines of race, gender, and class because they are based on the assumptions of society's elite.

SOCIOLOGY, THE OTHER SOCIAL SCIENCES, AND COMMON SENSE

Sociology is one of the **social sciences**; that is, it is one of the fields that studies various aspects of the social world. Among others are anthropology, communication studies, economics, geography, political science, and psychology. Generally speaking, sociology is the broadest of these fields; social scientists in other fields are more likely than sociologists to delve into specific aspects of the social world in much greater depth. Sociological study touches on the culture of concern to anthropologists, the nation-state of interest to political scientists, and the mental processes that are the focus of psychologists. However, that does not mean that sociology is in any sense "better" than—or, conversely, not as good as—the other social sciences.

Rather than comparing and contrasting these fields in general terms, we can look at the different ways in which these fields approach one of this book's signature concerns: globalization.

- *Anthropology:* Focuses on cultural aspects of societies around the world, such as the foods people eat and how they eat them, as well as the differences among cultures around the globe.

- *Communication studies:* Examines communications across the globe, with the internet and digital technologies of growing concern.

- *Economics:* Investigates the production, distribution, and consumption of resources through markets and other structures that span much of the globe, especially those based on and involving money.

- *Geography:* Studies spatial relationships on a global scale and maps those spaces.

- *Political science:* Studies nation-states and political actors, especially the ways in which they relate to one another around the world as well as how they have grown increasingly unable to control global flows of migrants, viruses, recreational drugs, internet scams, and the like.

- *Psychology:* Examines the ways in which individual identities are shaped by increased awareness of the rest of the world and tensions associated with globalization (e.g., job loss), which may lead to individual psychological problems such as depression (Lemert and Elliott 2006).

Sociology encompasses all these concerns, and many others, in its approach to globalization. It studies globe-straddling cultures (such as consumer or fast-food culture), relationships between political systems (e.g., the European Union and its member nations), communication networks (e.g., CNN, Telemundo, and Al Jazeera or Twitter and Facebook), and markets (e.g., for labor or stocks and bonds) that cover vast expanses of the globe. Sociology maps all of these, and even their impacts (both good and bad) on individuals. You might want to study the other fields to get a sense of the depth of what they have to offer on specific aspects of globalization. However, if you are looking for the field that gives you the broadest possible view of all of these things as well as the ways in which they interrelate, that field is sociology.

Although sociology and the other social sciences differ in important ways, they are all quite different from commonsense understandings of the social world. Everyone participates in globalization in one way or another. However, few if any people research these phenomena in the same rigorous way and to the same degree that social scientists examine them. That research leads, among other things, to a greater understanding of the nature of globalization. For example, you probably have a sense that globalization has changed society—perhaps even an impression that it is changing your life. What you are unlikely to spend much time thinking about are globalization's causes, effects, and linkages to other social phenomena, or its largely invisible effects on society and the world. Research on the topic is also likely to yield much more insight into the pros and cons of globalization on personal, societal, and global levels. Such detailed knowledge and insight will help you, and others, to navigate more successfully the accompanying changes in social processes and structures.

One example of the gap between common sense and social scientific knowledge relates to perceptions of the causes of climate change. There is strong consensus in the scientific community that global warming is occurring and that it is caused primarily by human activities, especially the burning of fossil fuels. However, data from a recent survey, illustrated in Figure 1.2, show that belief

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Estimated Percentage of U.S. Adults Who Think Climate Change Is Happening, by County of Residence, 2020
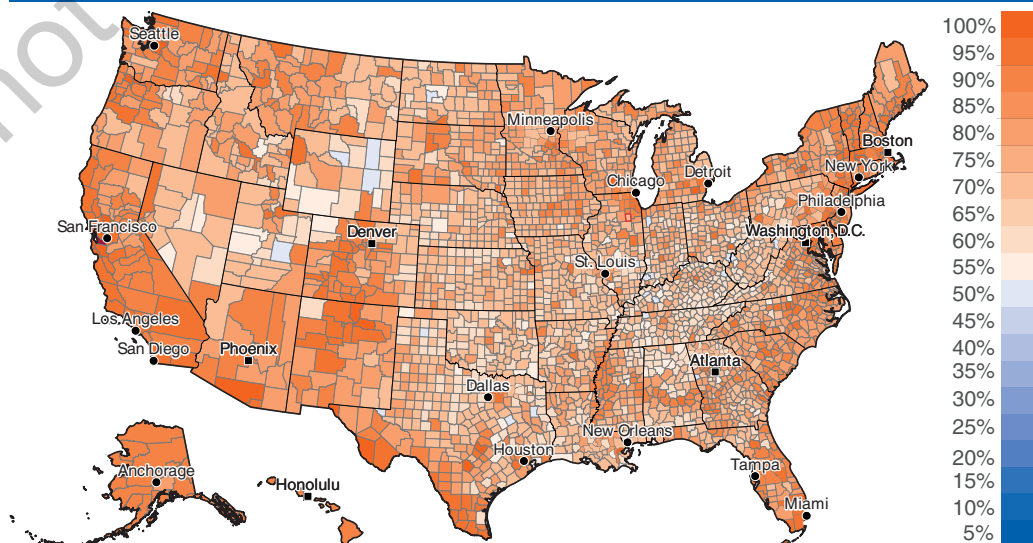
Source: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication: "Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2020."

in climate change varies widely from place to place in the United States. Overall, only 72 percent of people in the United States believe that global warming is happening and just 57 percent believe that it is caused by human activity. Furthermore, 43 percent believe that most scientists don't think global warming is happening.

Although common sense is important, even to sociologists, there is no substitute for the systematic study of the social world in both its minutest detail and its broadest manifestations.

## CENTRAL CONCERNS FOR A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SOCIOLOGY

Although the social world has been changing dramatically over the last two centuries or so and sociology has adapted to those changes, sociology has continued to focus on many of its traditional concerns. We have already mentioned industry, production, and work as long-term sociological interests; others include deviance and crime (see Chapter 7), the family (see Chapter 11), and the city (see Chapter 15). Of particular concern to many sociologists has been, and continues to be, the issue of inequality as it affects the poor, particularly racial and ethnic groups, women, and gender and sexual minorities (see Chapters 9 and 10). The bulk of this book is devoted to these basic sociological topics and concerns, but the discussion also encompasses the very contemporary issues of globalization, consumption, McDonaldization, and the digital world.

Globalization

Arguably, no social change is as important today as globalization because it is continually affecting all aspects of the social world everywhere on the globe. A date marking the beginning of globalization cannot be given with any precision, and in fact, it is in great dispute (Ritzer 2012b; Ritzer and Dean 2019; Steger 2017). However, the concept of globalization first began to appear in the popular and academic literature around 1990. Today, globalization is a central issue in the social world as a whole as well as in sociology; globalization and talk about it are all around us. In fact, we can be said to be living in the "global age" (Albrow 1996). However, this fact as well as the advantages of globalization have become increasingly questioned by some. Such questioning has led to talk of "deglobalization" (however, see the blog post "Deglobalization? Not a Chance" [Ritzer 2016]). Deglobalization was also behind the vote in the United Kingdom to exit the European Union (called Brexit), as well as actions taken by other European nations to create border restrictions. However, none of these actions are going to have much impact on globalization as a whole or in such areas as the internet, the media, and culture.

A major component of any past or present definition of sociology is society. **Society** is a complex pattern of social relationships that is bounded in space and persists over time. Society has traditionally been the largest unit of analysis in sociology. However, in the global age, societies are seen as declining in importance. This is the case, in part, because larger transnational and global social structures are growing in importance. These include the United Nations (UN); the European Union (EU); the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC); multinational corporations (MNCs), such as Google and ExxonMobil; and multinational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International. In at least some cases, these transnational structures are becoming more important than individual societies. OPEC is more important to the rest of the world's well-being than are the organization's key member societies, such as Abu Dhabi or even Saudi Arabia. However, this emphasis on the transnational and global has led to a counterreaction in which the focus has shifted back to one's own society (e.g., "America First").

Social processes, like social structures, exist not only at the societal level but also at the global level, and these global processes are increasing in importance. Consider migration (see Chapter 15). People move about, or migrate, within and between societies. For example, many people have moved from the northeastern United States to the West and the South. However, in the global age, people are increasingly moving between societies, some halfway around the world. (For example, one of the co-authors of this textbook, J. Michael Ryan, has held professional academic positions on five continents). The United States now has a higher percentage of immigrants than it has had in almost a century (see Figure 1.3). Many have migrated from and through Mexico to the United States (Massey 2003; Ortmeyer and

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FIGURE 1.3 ■ Number of Immigrants and Their Share of the Total U.S. Population, 1850–2021
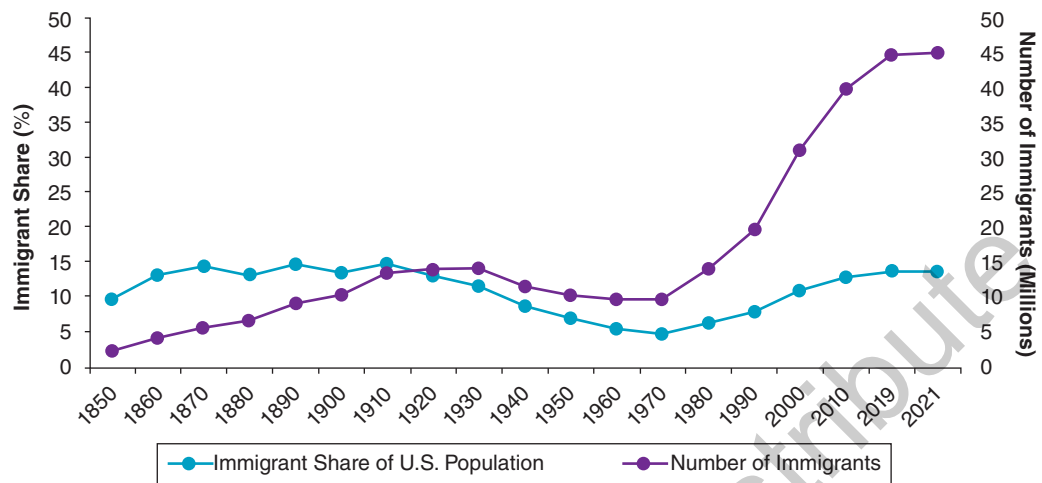
Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI), 2021.

Quinn 2012). More generally, large numbers of people are migrating from a number of predominantly Islamic societies in the Middle East and Africa to the West (Voas and Fleischmann 2012). In many cases, they were fleeing from war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya (Yeginsu and Hartocollis 2015). In addition, the movement of thousands of people from the West to join radical Islamist organizations (such as the Islamic State), especially in Syria and Iraq, has been of major concern to Western governments. Some fear that at least some of those involved in radical Islamist activities there will migrate back to the West and engage in terrorist acts.

There have always been large-scale population movements. However, in the global age, and even with recent restrictions, people generally move around the world far more freely and travel much greater distances than ever before. Another way of saying this is that people—and much else—are more "fluid." That is, they move farther, more easily, and more quickly than ever before. Younger people, especially millennials (or Generation Y, those born from the early 1980s through the late 1990s, as well as the following Generation Z), are likely to be especially mobile, including globally. Their greater fluidity is reflected in, among many other things, the fact that they are more likely to book airline tickets and to check in for flights online and to use boarding passes sent directly to their smartphones.

The movement of products of all types is also more fluid as a result of massive container ships, jet cargo planes, and package delivery services such as FedEx and UPS. Even more fluid is the digital "stuff" you buy on the internet when you download music, videos, movies, and so on. And in the realm of the family, tasks once confined to the home, such as caregiving and housework, have become increasingly fluid, as those who can afford to do so often outsource domestic labor (van der Lippe, Frey, and Tsvetkova 2012; Yeates 2009). More generally that greater fluidity is manifested in the information that flows throughout the world in the blink of an eye as a result of the internet, texting, e-mail, and social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter.

These flows can be expedited by structures of various types.

- Air cargo delivery will increasingly be facilitated by the development of the "aerotropolis" (Kasarda and Lindsay 2011), a planned "city of the future" developed because of proximity and access to a large, modern airport (Kasarda 2016). The "smart city" of New Songdo, South Korea, was built because such an airport (Incheon) is nearby and easily reached via a 12-mile-long bridge. This is in contrast to the usual situation in which the airport (e.g., Reagan National in Washington, D.C.; LAX in Los Angeles; Heathrow in London) is built within or very close to a city center. Traditional airports are typically too small and too difficult to reach, create too much noise for city residents, and cannot expand much beyond their current confines.

- The European Union (EU), founded in 1993, is an example of a social structure that serves to ease the flow of citizens among member nations (but not of people living outside the EU). Border restrictions were reduced or eliminated among the 27 EU member nations, although some of them have been reinstituted in recent years because of concern about the flow of undocumented immigrants. Similarly, the launch of the euro in 1999 greatly simplified economic transactions among the 20 EU countries that accept it as their currency.

- The continuing free flow of information on the internet is made possible by an organization called ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). It handles the internet's underlying infrastructure.

There are also structures that impede various kinds of global flows. National borders, passports and passport controls, security checks, and customs controls limit the movement of people throughout the world (some more than others). Such restrictions were greatly increased in many parts of the world after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001. This made global travel and border crossing more difficult and time-consuming. Then there are the even more obvious structures designed to limit the movement of people across borders. Examples include the fences between Israel and the West Bank, as well as one between Israel and Egypt completed in 2013. Even more recent are border fences under construction or completed in several European countries (e.g., Hungary, Slovenia), which are designed to limit, direct, or stop the flow of migrants from Syria and elsewhere (Surk 2015). During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump promised to turn the existing barriers between the United States and Mexico into a wall, at least for part of the length of the border. In the early days of his presidency, Trump encountered opposition to the wall because of its high cost and environmental concerns (among other reasons). From late 2018 to early 2019, the U.S. government endured a partial shutdown because of Trump's insistence on building the wall and congressional resistance to funding it. To date, the entire wall has not (yet) been completed.

The existing fences across the Mexican border, and increased border police and patrols, have already led unauthorized migrants to take longer and riskier routes into the United States. There are more than 100 immigration detention centers in the United States (see Figure 1.4). A crisis arose at the Mexican border in mid-2014 when tens of thousands of children from Central America flooded the area and overwhelmed detention centers (Archibold 2014). Another occurred in late 2018 when Trump exaggerated the risks posed by a "caravan" of immigrants from Central America and sought to counter it by sending thousands of U.S. troops to guard the border. There are, of course, many other structural barriers in the world, most notably trade barriers and tariffs, which limit the free movement of goods and services of many kinds.

FIGURE 1.4 ■ U.S. Immigration Detention Facilities, 2022

Legend
■ Privately operated facility
■ County or city facility
□ Unknown operator

Source: Freedom for Immigrants, "Mapping U.S. Immigration Detention," 2022.

In sum, **globalization** is defined by increasingly fluid global flows and the structures that expedite and impede those flows. Globalization is certainly increasing, and it brings with it a variety of both positive and negative developments (Ritzer and Dean 2021). On one side, most people throughout the world now have far greater access to goods, services, and information from around the globe than did people during the industrial age (especially thanks to the internet). On the other side, a variety of highly undesirable things also flow more easily around the world, including diseases such as COVID-19, Zika, HIV/AIDS, and Ebola, and pollution released primarily by industrialized countries that worsens the adverse effects of climate change (including global warming). Also on the negative side are the flows of such forms of "deviant globalization" as terrorism, sex trafficking, and the black markets for human organs and drugs (Gilman, Goldhammer, and Weber 2011; Marmo and Chazel 2016).

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a global phenomenon that has had a significant impact on nearly every aspect of our daily lives (Ryan 2021). The SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for causing COVID-19 moves around the world without concern for national borders, passport controls, or who it infects (although some are certainly more susceptible than others; see Ryan and Nanda 2023c). As of January 2023, Turkmenistan is the only country in the world to have not reported a single case of the virus, although nearly every scientist (and many others) believes that it does exist there as well. The virus has been confirmed to have infected hundreds of millions (though billions is a more likely estimate) and killed many millions around the world. And although some countries have had higher reported rates of infection and death than others, the virus has no doubt been a truly global phenomenon.

One reason the virus was able to spread so quickly is exactly because of globalization and the increase in travel around the world. One can now go almost anywhere else in the world within 24 hours (depending on flight times, of course), and a growing number of people do indeed travel great distances, and more regularly than before. The global movement of people has also meant a global movement of viruses.

Globalization also contributed to the breadth and depth of the impact of the pandemic. As countries went into lockdown, global travel, especially tourism, was significantly reduced. The movement of goods around the world also slowed considerably. The economic fallout of the pandemic sent shockwaves through the global economic system. The growing number of migrant workers were hit particularly hard as they were often caught between the policies of their host countries and their home countries.

The global availability of vaccines represents another example of globalization. Although many of the first global vaccines were invented (or discovered) in the UK and the United States, a larger number of these vaccines were then produced in other countries, especially India (which is home to the Serum Institute of India, the world's largest vaccine manufacturer). That said, despite producing these vaccines, residents of many of those countries were not able to access them as early or as easily as those in more privileged countries, many of whom began to horde vaccines (Ryan and Nanda 2023c). Among other things, COVID-19 vaccines have highlighted the increasing disconnect between where things are produced and where they are consumed.
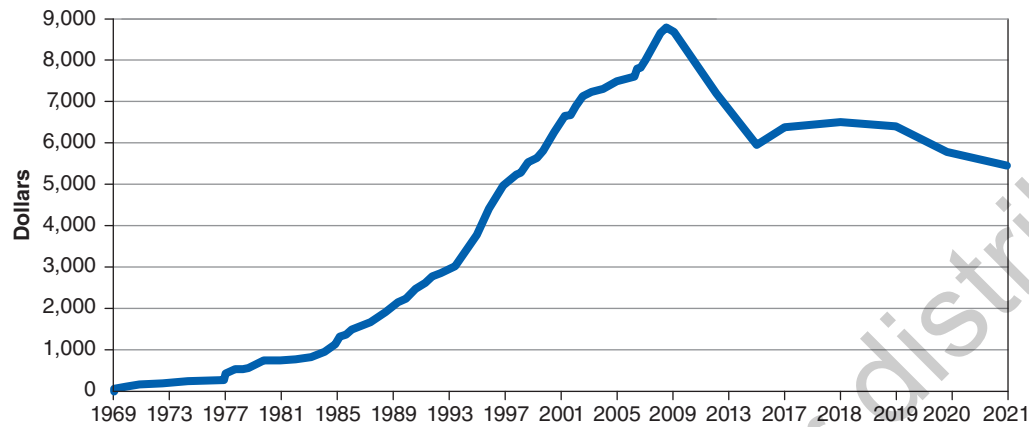
Consumption

Although consumption has been a central feature of societies for centuries, it is only in recent years that we can think in terms of a "world of consumers" (Trentmann 2016). Beginning in the 1950s, the center of many capitalist economies began to shift from production and work to **consumption**, or the process by which people obtain and use goods and services. During that period, the center of the several economies shifted from the factory and the office to the shopping mall (Baudrillard [1970] 1998; Wiedenhoft Murphy 2017a). For many, especially those with privilege, work and production became less important than consumption.

The dramatic rise in consumption was made possible by, among other things, the growing affluence of certain segments of the population. A more specific factor was the introduction (in the 1950s and 1960s) and increasing availability of credit cards. The use of credit cards has now become widespread at

shopping malls, on the internet, and in many other settings. One indicator of the increase in consumption in the United States is the increase in credit card debt. As you can see in Figure 1.5, credit card debt per household grew astronomically in the early years of credit card use (the figure begins with $37 in 1969). Credit card debt reached its high point, $8,729, in 2008 and steadily declined after the Great Recession to an average of $5,525 per household in 2021.

FIGURE 1.5 ■ U.S. Credit Card Debt per Capita, 1969–2021

Source: Data from the U.S. Federal Reserve, U.S. Census Bureau, and Experian Credit Reporting

Consumption is certainly significant economically, but it is significant in other ways as well. For example, culture is very much shaped by consumption, and various aspects of consumption become cultural phenomena. A good example is the iPhone, which is used in many ways to consume but more generally has revolutionized culture in innumerable ways. Billions of people have bought iPhones and similar smartphones as well as the ever-increasing number of apps associated with them. These phones have altered how and where people meet to socialize and the ways in which they socialize. In addition, the media and people in general spend so much time discussing the implications of the latest iPhone and similar products that these devices have become central to the larger culture in which we live. Rumors about the characteristics and release date of the next version of the iPhone continually add to the excitement.

Consumption and globalization are also deeply intertwined. Much of what we consume in the developed world comes from other countries. In 2022 alone, the United States imported more than $575 billion worth of goods from China; the comparable figure in 1985 was only $4 million in goods (Trading Economics 2023). Furthermore, the speed and convenience of internet commerce tend to make global realities and distances irrelevant to consumers. Finally, travel to other parts of the world—a form of consumption itself—is increasingly affordable and common. A major objective of tourists is often the sampling of the foods of foreign lands, as well as the purchasing of souvenirs (Chambers 2010; Gmelch 2010; Mak, Lumbers, and Eves 2012). Medical tourism is also becoming more common, with some estimating that it is a $100-billion-per-year industry (Fetscherin and Stephano 2016). Growing numbers of people are traveling great distances for such services as cosmetic procedures and even open heart surgery. They do so largely because the costs are much lower elsewhere in the world. For example, many U.S. women who have difficulty conceiving travel to developing countries such as India in order to hire surrogates, "rent" their uteruses and ovaries, and exploit their eggs (Pfeffer 2011).

Sociologists are understandably interested in these developments in the realm of consumption. Early sociologists completed many studies of work, production, factories, and factory workers. Today's sociologists continue to study work-related issues, but they are devoting increasing attention to consumption in general (Warde 2017) and more specifically to such phenomena as online shopping, done increasingly through the use of smartphones (Kim et al. 2017); the behavior of shoppers in more material locales such as department stores (Miller 1998) and lifestyle centers (Ryan 2013); and the

New consumption sites and products are often a hot cultural phenomenon. Many people will line up for hours, even camp out overnight, just to be among the first to be at such an event or to get such a product. These customers in Los Angeles are waiting to purchase the latest iPhone or Apple Watch.

Associated Press

development of more recent consumption sites, such as fast-food restaurants (Ritzer 2021) and shopping malls (Ritzer 2010b). All these have become increasingly global phenomena. The most popular destination for visitors to Barcelona is *not* one of Antoni Gaudí's amazing architectural creations (such as Sagrada Familia, the symbol of the city) but rather a new outlet mall on the outskirts of the city (Mount 2014). Online shopping is increasingly popular in many places, including in India and especially in China (Bearak 2014; Wang and Pfanner 2013). The growth of online shopping in developed countries, and even more in less-developed countries, has been made possible by the massive expansion and growing popularity of smartphones.

Critiquing Consumption

The sociological study of consumption sites involves, among many other things, a critical look at the ways in which they are structured. These sites may be set up to lead people to consume certain things and not others, to consume more than they might have intended, and to go into debt (Brubaker, Lawless, and Tabb 2012; Manning 2001; Marron 2009; Ritzer 1995). Consider Shoedazzle (www.shoedazzle.com), a website that uses commercials and "style quizzes" to recruit new members. Shoedazzle highlights an "exclusive" VIP membership status on its webpage, which anyone can join. Making its members feel special through seemingly personalized style quizzes and VIP memberships are intended to lure consumers into buying more shoes (and other products) than they really need.

Sociologists are also interested in how consumers use shopping malls and e-tailers in ways that were not anticipated by their designers. For example, people often wander through shopping malls and their many shops, which have been designed to spur consumption, without buying anything. Defunct malls are serving as impromptu skate parks. Students are using Amazon as a source for term-paper bibliographies rather than buying the books. Travelers are using internet sites such as Expedia and KAYAK to compare prices but then buying airplane tickets on the airlines' own websites.

Social change continues. The Great Recession and its aftermath altered many things, including the degree to which society is dominated by consumption. Even today, long after the onset of the recession in 2007 and its supposed end, many consumers remain reluctant to spend money, or at least as much as they did in the past, on consumption (Kurtz 2014). As a result, many consumption sites have experienced great difficulties. Many outdoor strip malls and some indoor malls have emptied; they have become "dead malls" (as documented on the site http://deadmalls.com). Many of the malls that continue to exist

have numerous vacant stores, including abandoned large department stores. Casinos in Atlantic City, New Jersey, are being shuttered, and there are those who want to see the city become more like the simpler beach community it once was (Hurdle 2014). It seems possible, although highly unlikely, that even though we entered the consumption age only about half a century ago, we now may be on the verge of what could be called the "postconsumption age." Although excessive consumption and the related high level of debt were key factors in causing the Great Recession, a postconsumption age would bring with it problems of its own, such as fewer jobs and a declining standard of living for many.

McDonaldization

Ritzer's study of a major site for consuming food—the fast-food restaurant—led to the development of the concept of **McDonaldization**, or the process by which the rational principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of society and more societies throughout the world (Ritzer 2021; Ritzer and Miles, 2019; for a number of critical essays on this perspective, see Ritzer 2010c). This process leads to the creation of rational systems—not only fast-food restaurants, but also, among others, online shopping sites—that have four defining characteristics:

- *Efficiency.* The emphasis is on the use of the quickest and least costly means to whatever end is desired. It is clear that employees of fast-food restaurants work efficiently: Burgers are cooked and assembled as if on an assembly line, with no wasted movements or ingredients. Similarly, customers are expected to spend as little time as possible in the fast-food restaurant. Perhaps the best example of efficiency is the drive-through window, a highly organized means for employees to dole out meals in a matter of seconds.

- *Calculability.* You hear a lot at McDonald's about quantities: how large the food portions are—the Big Mac—and how low the prices are—the dollar breakfast. You don't hear as much, however, about the quality of the restaurant's ingredients or its products. Similarly, you may hear about how many burgers are served per hour or how quickly they are served, but you don't hear much about the skill of employees. A focus on quantity also means that tasks are often done under great pressure. This means that they are often done in a slipshod manner.

- *Predictability.* McDonaldization ensures that the entire experience of patronizing a fast-food chain is nearly identical from one geographic setting to another—even globally—and from one time to another. When customers enter a McDonald's restaurant, employees ask what they wish to order, following scripts created by the corporation. For their part, customers can expect to find most of the usual menu items. Employees, following another script, can be counted on to thank customers for their order. Thus, a highly predictable ritual is played out in the fast-food restaurant.

- *Control.* In McDonaldized systems, technology exerts a good deal of control over people, processes, and products. French fry machines limit what employees can do and control any remaining tasks. They buzz when the fries are done and even automatically lift them out of the hot oil when they've reached just the right amount of crispiness. Workers must load fry baskets with uncooked fries and unload them when the baskets emerge from the oil. The automatic fry machine may save time and prevent accidents, but it limits and dictates employee actions and leaves them with little meaningful work. Similarly, the drive-through window can be seen as a technology that ensures that customers dispose of their own garbage, if only by dumping it in the backseats of their cars or on the roadside.

Paradoxically, rationality often seems to lead to its exact opposite—irrationality. Just consider the problems of meaningless work, roadside litter due to drive-through services at fast-food restaurants, or the societal problems associated with childhood obesity, which has been blamed, in part, on the ubiquity of fast food. Another of the irrationalities of rationality is dehumanization. Fast-food employees are forced to work in dehumanizing jobs, which can lead to job dissatisfaction, alienation, and high turnover rates. Fast-food customers are forced to eat in dehumanizing settings, such as in the cold and impersonal atmosphere of the fast-food restaurant, in their cars, or on the move as they walk down the street. As more of the world succumbs to McDonaldization, dehumanization becomes increasingly pervasive.

Sociologist George Ritzer theorized that the rational principles of fast food are coming to dominate many aspects of our social lives. The same defining characteristics of this Lotteria fast food restaurant in Vietnam—efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control—can be observed across a range of contemporary organizations and institutions.

David R. Frazier Photolibrary, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

It is clear that the internet has become increasingly important to many and for more things and that Amazon is a dominant force on the internet, especially in consumption (representing nearly 38 percent of all e-commerce in the United States in 2022), but it is also increasingly a force in bricks-and-clicks with the opening in recent years of conventional bookstores and convenience stores and with its purchase in 2017 of the Whole Foods chain of supermarkets. These "brick" sites complement in various ways the "clicks" on Amazon, and they are increasingly likely to do so in the future as Amazon creates a more seamless system.

Comparisons between McDonald's and Amazon from the point of view of the McDonaldization thesis demonstrate that Amazon is far more McDonaldized than McDonald's.

- Amazon makes obtaining a wide array of products highly *efficient* by eliminating lengthy and perhaps fruitless trips to department stores, big-box stores (such as Walmart), and the mall. What could be more efficient than sitting at home, ordering products online, and having your order delivered in a day or two? Although McDonald's made obtaining a meal in a restaurant more efficient through the drive-through window, it still has the inefficiency of requiring consumers to drive (or walk) to the restaurant to get their food.

- Shopping on Amazon involves a highly predictable series of online steps that lead to the completion of an order. McDonald's brought great *predictability* to eating in a restaurant. There are well-defined steps in obtaining a meal there: join the line, scan the marquee to know what to order when you (finally) get to the counter, order, pay, take the tray of food to a table, eat it, and dispose of the debris on completion of the "meal." However, there are a series of unpredictabilities at McDonald's, absent at Amazon, such as those associated with inattentive, surly, or incompetent counter people.

- There is great *calculability* involved in shopping on Amazon. Prices are clearly marked and consumers know exactly what the total cost of an order is. Before finalizing a purchase customers are able to delete items, thereby reducing the final cost. The marquee at McDonald's offers preset prices and similar calculability, although unless customers are able to do the math in their heads, the final price is not known until the purchase is completed.

- Shopping on Amazon is tightly controlled by the nature of the site and its reliance on nonhuman technologies. Consumers can only order what is on the site and cannot ask (there is no one to ask) for products to be modified. In addition, there are no crowds, to say nothing of unreliable and intrusive salespeople, on Amazon. Great *control* is exerted over customers at McDonald's, but they are able to request some modifications in at least some of the food they order. This is one of the reasons that lines can be long at counters and drive-throughs. Counter people, as well as those who staff the drive-through windows, can adversely affect the process in various ways (e.g., food may not be modified as requested; it is not unusual to drive or walk some distance only to find that one's sack of food does not include exactly what was ordered).

The main *irrationality of rationality* associated with Amazon is its tendency to lead to excessive consumption, while that is not possible at McDonald's given its limited menu and low prices. However, it is possible, even likely, to consume too many calories, too much fat, and too much sugar at McDonald's (Spurlock 2005).

The Digital World

Sociology has always concerned itself with the social aspects and implications of **technology**, or the interplay of machines, tools, skills, and procedures for the accomplishment of tasks. One example is the assembly line, a defining feature of early twentieth-century factories. Later, sociologists became interested in the automated technologies that came to define factories. However, technologies have continued to evolve considerably since then. Sociologists are now devoting an increasing amount of attention to the digital world that has emerged as a result of new technologies already mentioned in this chapter, such as computers, smartphones, the internet, and social media sites such as TikTok, Facebook and Twitter (Mukherjee 2018).

Although we discuss life in the digital world throughout this book, living digitally is not separate from living in the social world. In fact, the two forms of living are increasingly intersecting and creating an augmented world (Jurgenson 2012). The widespread use of smartphones allows people to text many others to let them know they are going to be at a local club. This can lead to a spontaneous social gathering at the club that would not have occurred were it not for this new technology. One of the most dramatic examples of the effect of smartphones on the social world are seen in their use in mobilizing, especially through Twitter, large numbers of people to become involved, and stay involved, in social movements such as the revolutions in Egypt (2011) and Ukraine (2014).

The networking sites on the internet that involve social interaction are the most obviously sociological in character (Aleman and Wartman 2008; Patchin and Hinduja 2010). For example, Hodkinson (2015) has pointed out the similarities between teenagers' bedrooms and their social networking sites in terms of privacy issues. Both are intimate personal spaces where teenagers socialize and individualize in ways that express their identities. Social networking sites are especially important in North America (Europe is not far behind), where the percentage of those with access to the internet is highest (see Figure 1.6). However, their importance is increasing elsewhere, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, as reflected in the role they played there in recent social revolutions. Protesters used cell phones and the internet to inform each other, and the world, about the evolving scene. To take another example, Facebook.com/yalaYL has become a key site where Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arabs communicate with each other about both everyday concerns and big issues such as the prospect for peace in the Middle East. This social networking takes place online, while peaceful face-to-face interaction between such people, and between their leaders, is difficult or nonexistent, especially in light of continuing violence in and around Israel (Bronner 2011).

Although social networking sites can bring about greater interaction, they also come between people and affect the nature of interaction. Twitter limits each message to 280 characters (though premium subscribers have up to 4,000 characters), but face-to-face communication has no such limits. On the other hand, face-to-face communication is limited to a shared physical space, whereas communication via Twitter travels anywhere there is a device connected to the internet. Sociologists are interested in getting a better handle on the nature of the differences, as well as the similarities, between mediated

FIGURE 1.6 ■ Internet Access by Geographic Region, 2021

Percentage of population with internet access
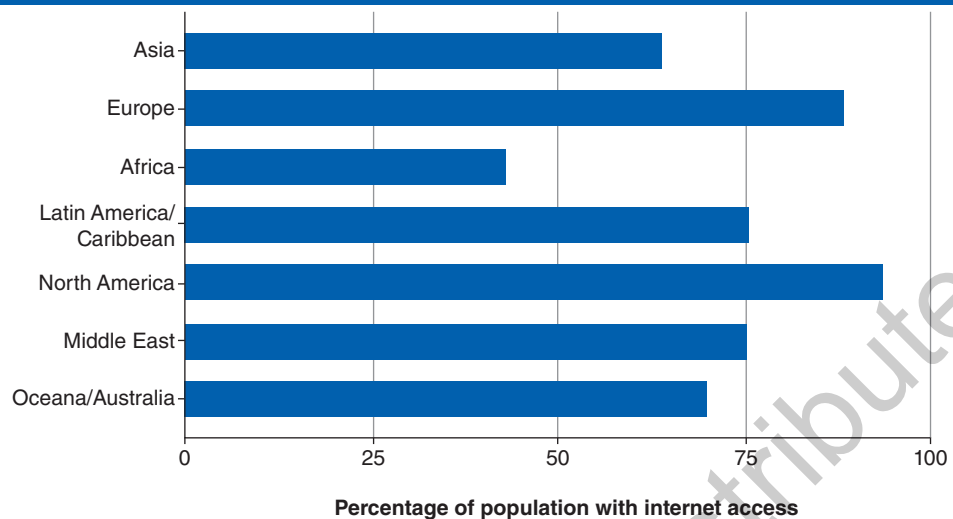
Source: Internet World Stats. 2021. "Internet Users Distribution in the World—2021."

and nonmediated (e.g., face-to-face) interaction. In technologically **mediated interaction**, technology such as the internet and the smartphone comes between the people who are communicating, while there is no such interference in nonmediated interaction. People who are shy and insecure when it comes to dating or sex, for example, may be much more comfortable relating to others on mediated websites such as Hinge, Match.com, OkCupid, and Tinder.

Another sociological issue related to the internet is the impact on our lives of spending so much time interacting on social networking sites. For example, are you more likely to write term papers for your college classes using shorter sentences and more abbreviations because of your experience on Twitter or with texting? Consider also the impact of the nearly 7.5 hours per day that kids aged 15–18 in the United States spend in front of a screen using entertainment media (CDC 2023). In some cases, little time remains for other activities (e.g., schoolwork, face-to-face interaction). Increasing the ability of children to spend time on screen media is the growing availability of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. In 2017, 98 percent of children in the United States under 8 years of age lived in homes with mobile devices, compared to 52 percent just two years earlier. They were also more than 30 percent more likely in 2017 to use such devices than they were in 2013 (Common Sense Media 2017a). The pandemic has no doubt seen those numbers rise although it will be some time before we know how stable such a rise might become. A study of parents and children in fast-food restaurants found that a significant majority of the parents were more absorbed in their mobile devices than they were in relating to their children (Radesky et al. 2014).

We may also multitask among several online and offline interactions simultaneously, such as in class or while doing homework. You may think you do a great job of multitasking, but dividing focus in this way can actually reduce your ability to comprehend and remember and thus lower your performance on tests and other assignments (PBS 2010).

Internet technology also affects the nature of consumption. More of it is taking place on such sites as eBay and Amazon, and that trend has definitely been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, consumers spent a record $5.7 trillion shopping online in 2022 (Pasquali 2023). It is also easier for people to spend money on consumption on internet sites than it is in the material world. It is worth noting that these sites, as well as the internet in general, are global in scope. The ease with which global interactions and transactions occur on the internet is a powerful indicator of, and spur to, the process of globalization.

Smartphones are also having a variety of effects on consumption. For example, on the one hand, they are making it easier for people to find particular kinds of restaurants and to get to them quickly and efficiently. On the other hand, when people are eating in those restaurants, smartphones tend to slow down service because diners take time photographing the meal, taking selfies, and asking waitstaff to take photos of them (Griswold 2014). Many shoppers use their smartphones in stores to look

Social changes brought about by the thorough integration of the internet in most areas of our lives have been enormously influential—and the changes are far from over. Teenagers and even very young children take our constant connectivity for granted, suggesting that most of the changes we are witnessing will become ever more pervasive.

Hill Street Studios/Blend Images/Getty Images

up product information, compare prices, and download coupons (Skrovan 2017). Target now uses Bluetooth beacon technology to locate shoppers in its stores via a Target app on their smartphone and to direct them to products on their shopping lists (Perez 2017).

Digital Living: Blogging and Tweeting about Sociology

Blogging and tweeting are two popular ways to transmit and acquire information today. Current events are often posted in real time, sometimes by individuals who are witnessing them. The Arab Spring was referred to as the Twitter Revolution because people around the world were able to follow these political uprisings through tweets posted by protestors. Sports fans can follow their favorite teams and on game day receive instantaneous alerts when their team scores a touchdown or scores a run. Individuals who want to find alternative perspectives on social issues from the mainstream press can follow a variety of alternative online sites (e.g., the far-right-wing Breitbart News) and blogs (e.g., the left-leaning Mother Jones). Blogging and tweeting encourage individual agency. They offer the opportunity for those of us with access to participate in the social construction of reality and can be used as platforms to promote social reforms, such as #BlackLivesMatter. But there are a few structural constraints attached to these methods of communication. Twitter limits tweets to 280 characters unless you are a paid subscriber. Many popular blogs and Twitter accounts are written and maintained by celebrities, professional experts, and representatives of formal organizations (some of which are highly politicized), who have more power to shape reality than the average person does. Especially notable in this regard is the use of Twitter by Donald Trump, both as presidential candidate and as president, to reach directly his supporters and thereby bypass the traditional media. Trump's Twitter account (@RealDonaldTrump) has almost 90 million followers.

Sociologists and organizations devoted to sociological theory and research use blogs and tweets to expose others to the sociological imagination, helping individuals at the micro level realize that their private troubles are connected to larger public issues. Popular sociologists who blog include one of the authors of this book, George Ritzer (https://georgeritzer.wordpress.com), who discusses the themes addressed in this book, such as McDonaldization, globalization, and consumption, and Philip Cohen, who writes about family inequality (https://familyinequality.wordpress.com). The Society Pages blog

(https://thesocietypages.org) includes a set of sociology blogs such as The Color Line (https://thesocie typages.org/colorline) and Sociology Lens (www.sociologylens.net) that keep readers current on issues pertaining to inequality, race, gender, crime, and health. The American Sociology Association's blog (speak4sociology.org) offers a forum for its followers to debate sociological issues. A variety of Twitter accounts regularly post comments about and links to relevant sociological topics, including @Soc_ Imagination, @SociologyLens, @DiscoverSoc, @SocWomen, and @SocImages. In addition, professional sociologists, such as Michael Burawoy (@burawoy), Matthew Desmond (@just_shelter), Zeynep Tufekci (@zeynep), and Sudhir Venkatesh (@avsudhir), tweet to promote awareness about social problems and publicize their research and social activism.

SUMMARY

Sociology is the systematic examination of the ways in which people are affected by and affect the social structures and social processes associated with the groups, organizations, cultures, societies, and world in which they exist. Social changes in the last few centuries, including the Industrial Revolution, the growth of the service sector, and the arrival of the information age, have strongly influenced the field of sociology. This book deals with innumerable social issues, but it focuses especially on the powerful structural forces in the social world that have drawn the attention of contemporary sociologists: globalization, consumption, McDonaldization and digital technology.

As the world has become more globalized, it has become more fluid as people, products, and information flow more quickly and easily across national borders. The role of consumption in our daily lives over the past few decades has resulted in the increasing use of credit cards and the growing popularity of online shopping. Digital technology is changing how and when we interact with others, including the near ubiquitous use of smartphones and social media. The process of McDonaldization, or an emphasis on efficiency, calculability, predictability, and technological control, characterizes many aspects of globalization, consumption, and digital technology.

Social changes such as globalization, consumption, and digital technology can be understood using C. Wright Mills's "sociological imagination," which calls on us to look at social phenomena not just from a personal perspective but also from the outside, from a distinctively sociological perspective. In addition, recognizing that much of our reality is socially constructed can help us comprehend how the agency of individuals can bring about social change; at the same time, these changes become structures that both enable and constrain social action. These social structures become enduring and slow to change, while social processes represent the more dynamic aspects of society.

Sociologists study many issues, sometimes to understand them through scientific research and sometimes to help generate change and reform. The goal of sociology as a pure science is to collect large quantities of data about the social world to build knowledge, while the goal of sociology as a means of social reform aims to use this knowledge for social change.

Sociology, like other social sciences, distinguishes itself from commonsense opinions about the social world by developing rigorous theories and engaging in systematic research to study social phenomena. Sociology, the least specialized of the social sciences, encompasses aspects of anthropology, political science, psychology, economics, and communications.

KEY TERMS

butterfly effect	McDonaldization
consumption	mediated interaction
dangerous giants	meso
fact	micro
globalization	opinion
macro	professional sociologist

social construction of reality

social processes

social sciences

social structures

society

sociological imagination

sociology

technology

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How is the projected impact of the driverless car an example of the butterfly effect? Use your sociological imagination to think of ways in which your individual choices and actions will be influenced by this development.

2. Your social world is continually changing. What are some examples of new technologies that have been developed during your lifetime? How have they changed the way you interact with and relate to others?

3. How do shopping malls reflect increasing globalization? Do you think shopping malls lead to a sameness of culture around the world, or do they allow local areas to retain their differences?

4. What items are you most likely to buy using the internet? How do social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok) influence what you consume?

5. What social structures have impeded the flow of information in the past? How have the internet and social networking sites made it easier to get around these structural barriers?

6. According to C. Wright Mills, how are private troubles different from public issues? How can we use the micro/macro distinction to show how private troubles are related to public issues?

7. What is the difference between structure and agency? Within your classroom, could you be a "dangerous giant"? In what ways does your school prevent you from becoming a dangerous giant?

8. What do sociologists mean by the social construction of reality? How can you apply this perspective to better understand trends in the fashion industry?

9. Can you think of ways in which we can use "pure science" to better understand the process of McDonaldization? What do you believe should be the goal of research?

10. How is sociology's approach to globalization different from that of other social sciences? What are the advantages of using a sociological approach to understand globalization?