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2

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Identify the most important classical sociologists and their major contributions to the field.
- 2.2 Identify other influential early figures in classical sociology.
- 2.3 Compare and contrast structural/functional, conflict/critical, and inter/actionist theories.

HOW DO THEORIES HELP US UNDERSTAND POLITICS AND OTHER SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS?

The election of a number of highly polarizing political figures in recent years (Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary) has arguably led to increased levels of political maneuvering, fiery rhetoric, and intense partisanship, including after such people have been voted out of office. Many countries have witnessed increasing divergence between political parties on a range of social issues and, to paraphrase a popular saying, politics no longer seems as usual.

How would a sociologist explain such highly partisan political action and mutual antagonism? The answer depends to a large extent on which sociologist you ask. Like other scientists, sociologists use theories to make sense of the phenomena they study. A sociologist's perspective on any given issue is therefore framed by the particular explanatory theories to which they subscribe.

Some sociologists suggest that partisan political maneuvering and debate, even if impassioned, are a normal aspect of stable government, necessary to resolve issues and move society forward. Others believe that factions fighting to promote their own interests are enacting a simple, if large-scale, power struggle. Still others might explain the partisanship as a reflection of the deep ideological divide that exists within the population as a whole. In this view, politicians' actions represent nothing more than the dominant ideas, beliefs, and feelings of their constituents.

In this chapter, we identify the particular sociological theories that frame each of these perspectives—and many more. Each is the product of decades (and sometimes centuries) of development, and each has undergone testing, modification, and critique by some of sociology's greatest minds. As you learn about the notable sociological thinkers—both classical and contemporary—and the theories they developed, consider the sociopolitical events that shaped them during their lives. Consider, too, the events that have shaped, and are shaping, you and your own perspectives on the world.

This chapter is devoted to the ways in which sociologists think, or theorize. All sociologists theorize. While some stay very close to their data, others feel free to depart from the data and offer very broad and general theories—"grand theories"—of the social world (Hoffman 2013; Skinner 1985; Vidal, Adler, and Delbridge 2015). Most of this chapter is devoted to grand theories and to the people who produced them.

Theories are sets of interrelated ideas that have a wide range of applications, deal with centrally important issues, and have stood the test of time (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2018). Theories have stood the test of time when they continue to be applicable to the changing social world and have withstood challenges from those who accept other theories. Sociological theories are necessary to make sense of both the innumerable social phenomena and the many highly detailed findings of sociological research. Without such theories, we would have little more than knowledge of isolated bits of the social world. However, once those theories have been created, they can be applied broadly to such areas as the economy, organizations, religion, society as a whole, and even the globe. The theories to be discussed in this chapter deal with very important social issues that have affected the social world for centuries and will likely continue to affect it. Among these issues are violence, suicide, alienation and exploitation in the work world, and revolution.

Consider, for example, a recent theory of violence developed by Randall Collins (2008; Ferret and Collins 2018), which was mentioned briefly in Chapter 1. In line with the definition of theory offered previously, violence is clearly an important social issue, and Collins's theory promises to stand the test of time. Collins seeks to contradict the idea that violence is inherent in people and emphasizes the social contexts and causes of violence instead. He is developing a broad theory of violence that

encompasses everything from a slap in the face to war, a quarrel to mass murder in gas chambers, drunken carousing to serial killing, a rape to systematic rape as a war crime, and the murder of someone with a different ethnicity to ethnic cleansing. Beyond being a very wide-ranging social phenomenon, violence usually generates powerful reactions among those who commit it, its victims, and those who witness it or read about it. As Collins puts it, violence is “horrible and heroic, disgusting and exciting, the most condemned and glorified of human acts” (2008, 1). But the details of Collins’s theory are not the concern here. Rather, it is the fact that he is seeking to develop a perspective that meets our definition of theory. In the coming years we will need to see whether Collins’s specific theory actually stands the test of time. However, it is clear that violence is an important social phenomenon worth theorizing about (and studying). Collins has taken an important step in developing such a theory.



Officials exhume the bodies of unidentified civilians killed in 2022 during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sociologists construct theories to explain violence of all kinds, including war crimes.

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Violence is not only important in itself as a social phenomenon; it also raises important issues for other aspects of the social world. For example, the mass media are constantly confronted with decisions about how much violence—and the resulting carnage—they should show to the public. The wrenching choices that such depictions (often readily and permanently available on internet sites such as YouTube and Twitter) pose for the mass media, to say nothing about the families and friends of the victims, continue.

Theorizing about the social world is not restricted to sociologists such as Randall Collins; everyone theorizes. What, then, distinguishes the theorizing of sociologists from the typical person on the street? One difference is that whereas the typical person on the street might theorize casually, sociologists go about their theorizing systematically by, among other things, making the social world their laboratory. For example, someone might notice two people together. Drawing on their observations of how those people are interacting (including what they are wearing and their nonverbal communication) and your ideas of romantic relationships and behaviors, they may conclude that they are dating (Weigel 2016). They have a (perhaps unconscious) theory about dating, and they use it to interpret their actions and predict how they might interact next. In contrast, sociologists are likely to be conscious of their theory of dating. With that theory as background, they might study behaviors among many pairs of people, carefully analyze the similarities and differences among them, compare those behaviors to those of people in other societies, and then conclude that a particular style of interaction characterizes dating couples. More concretely, a study of 144 college students used a classical theory of deviance to demonstrate that academic and interpersonal stress increased dating violence (Mason and Smithey 2012).

Using another (social learning) theory, Giordano and colleagues (2015) interviewed nearly 1,000 students in 32 schools and found that the level of violence in a school was a significant predictor of whether a student would perpetrate a violent act. To some degree, perpetrators “learn” to commit violent acts in the context of schools characterized by violence. At some level, we are all theorists, but professional sociologists consciously use theories to analyze scientific data systematically in order to make better sense of their results and of the social world.

Sociologists not only work directly with, and read the work of, other contemporary sociologists; they also base their theories on the work of many important thinkers in the field who have come before them. As the great physicist Sir Isaac Newton ([1687] 2005) put it, “If I have seen further, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Many of today’s sociologists theorize because they are able to build on the thoughts of the classical “grand theorists” to be discussed in this chapter.

THE GIANTS OF CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

The roots of professional academic sociology lie primarily in early nineteenth-century Europe. However, there were much earlier thinkers whose ideas are relevant to sociology. Examples from the third and fourth centuries BCE are Plato and Aristotle. Centuries later, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) developed sociological theories that dealt with such issues as the scientific study of society, the interrelationship between politics and the economy, and the relationship between primitive societies and the medieval societies of his time (Alatas 2011, 2013). Such topics were also of interest to nineteenth-century theorists and continue to be of interest today. For example, Alatas (2014) has applied Khaldun’s thinking to such modern Arab states as Syria and its prospects in light of the war raging there.

The emergence of professional academic sociological theory was closely related to intellectual and social developments throughout the nineteenth century in Europe. It is important to recognize that sociological theory did not develop in isolation or come of age in a social vacuum. In Chapter 1, we briefly mentioned the impact of the Industrial Revolution. Other changes that profoundly affected sociological theorizing were the political revolutions that wracked European society (especially the French Revolution, 1789–1799), the rise of socialism, the women’s rights movement, the urbanization occurring throughout Europe, ferment in the religious realm, and the growth of science.

Early Sociological Theorists

Among the most important early sociological theorists are Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, and Herbert Spencer.

- *Auguste Comte* (1798–1857) is noted, as pointed out in Chapter 1, for the invention of the term *sociology*, development of a general theory of the social world, and interest in developing a science of sociology (Pickering 2011).
- *Harriet Martineau* (1802–1876), like Comte, developed a scientific and general theory, although she is best known today for her feminist, women-centered sociology (Hoecker-Drysdale 2011).
- *Herbert Spencer* (1820–1903) also developed a general, scientific theory of society, but his overriding theoretical interest was in social change, specifically evolution in not only the physical domain but also the intellectual and social domains (Francis 2011).

Although Comte, Martineau, and Spencer were important predecessors, the three theorists to be discussed in this section—Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim—are arguably the most significant of the classical era’s social theorists and of the greatest continuing contemporary relevance to sociology (and other fields). Their relevance to you lies in the fact that, among many other points, they analyzed the negative effects of too much (Marx and Weber) and too little (Durkheim) social control on people. Their analyses were connected to their major fears about the modern world—that capitalist systems alienate and exploit us (Marx), that rational systems trap and limit us (Weber), and that a

weak shared culture exerts too little external control and leads us to run wild in the endless pursuit of that which ultimately proves unsatisfying, if not disastrous (Durkheim).

Karl Marx

Marx (1818–1883) is often dismissed as an ideologue. In recent years, he has been disparaged because of the supposed failure of a social system—communism—that is generally considered to be his brainchild. In fact, the communism that came to be practiced in the Soviet Union and other countries had little relationship to Marx's abstract sense of communism. He would have been as critical of it as he was of capitalism. However, there is an important sociological theory in Marx's work (Antonio 2011; Holt 2015). Its importance is reflected in the fact that many theorists have built on it and many others have created theories in opposition to Marx's perspective (Sitton 2010).

Marx was mainly a macro theorist who focused most of his attention on the structure of capitalist society, a relatively new phenomenon in his day. Marx defined **capitalism** as an economic system based on the fact that one group of people—the **capitalists**—owns what is needed for production, including factories, machines, and tools. A second group—the **proletariat**, or workers—owns little or nothing except their capacity for work and labor. In order to work and survive, the workers must sell their labor to the capitalists in exchange for wages. In Marx's view, the capitalist system is marked by **exploitation** (Carver 2018). The proletariat produces virtually everything but gets only a small portion of the income derived from the sale of the products. The capitalists, who do little productive work, reap the vast majority of the rewards. In other words, the capitalists *exploit* the workers. Furthermore, driven by the desire to generate larger and larger profits, the capitalists seek to keep costs, including wages, as low as possible. As a result, the proletariat barely subsists, often working long hours but still barely, or not at all, able to survive.

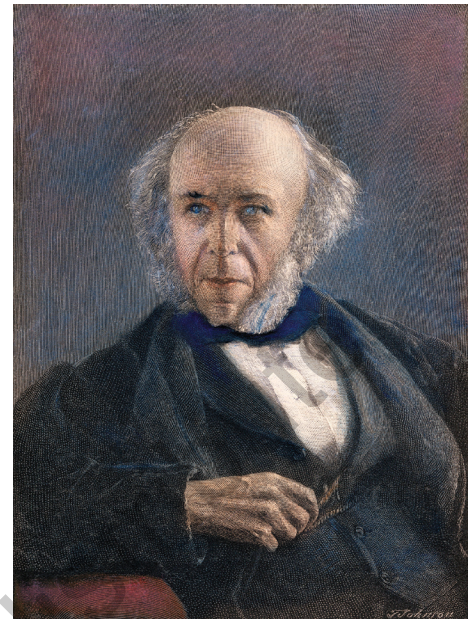
In addition, the workers experience **alienation** on the job and in the workplace (Carver 2018; Mészáros 2006). They are alienated because

- The work they do—for example, repetitively and mechanically inserting wicks into candles or attaching hubcaps to cars—is not a natural expression of human skills, abilities, and creativity.
- They have little or no connection to the finished product.
- Instead of working harmoniously with their fellow workers, they may have little or no contact with them. In fact, they are likely to be in competition or outright conflict with them over, for example, who keeps and who loses their jobs or who gets promotions and raises.

Thus, what defines people as human beings—their ability to think, to act on the basis of that thought, to be creative, to interact with other human beings—is denied to the workers in capitalism. As capitalists adopt new technologies to make their companies more competitive and seek to continually extract more and more profit, alienation among the workers increases. For example, faster, more mechanized assembly lines make it even more difficult for coworkers to relate to one another.

Over time, Marx believed, the workers' situation would grow much worse as the capitalists increased the level of exploitation and restructured the work so that the proletariat became even more alienated. The gap between these two social classes would grow wider and increasingly visible in terms of the two groups' economic position and the nature of their work (or lack thereof). Once workers understood how capitalism “really” worked, especially the ways in which it worked to their detriment, they would rise up and overthrow that system in what Marx called a proletarian revolution.

According to Marx, the outcome of the proletarian revolution would be the creation of a communist society. Interestingly, Marx had very little to say explicitly about what a communist society would look like. In fact, he was highly critical of utopian thinkers who wasted their time drawing beautiful



Though Herbert Spencer never earned an academic degree, his work contributed greatly to the field of scientific sociology, especially in the study of evolutionary change.

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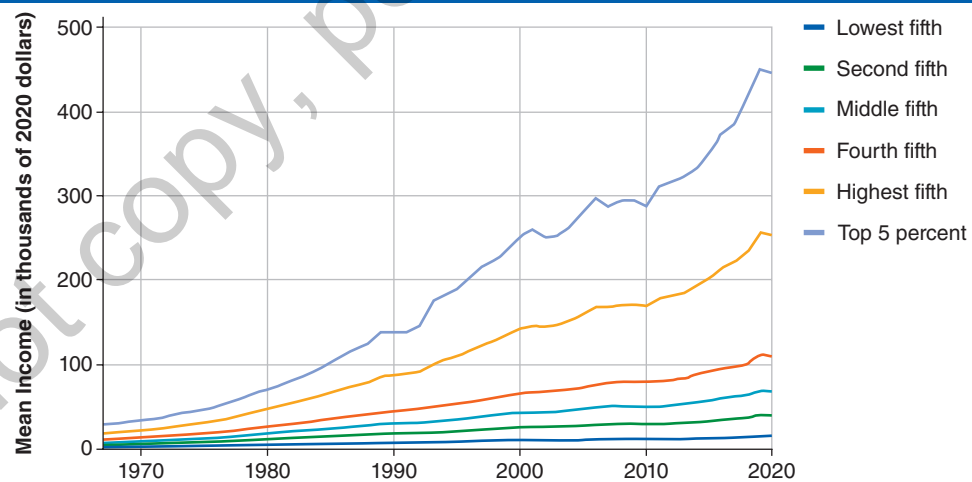
portraits of an imaginary future state. Marx was too much the sociologist and concentrated instead on trying to better understand the structures of the ongoing capitalist society. He was particularly interested in the ways in which they operated, especially to the advantage of the capitalists and to the disadvantage of the proletariat.

Marx believed that his work was needed because the capitalist class tried hard to make sure that the proletariat did not truly understand the nature of capitalism. One of the ways in which the capitalists did this was to produce a set of ideas, an ideology, which distorted the reality of capitalism and concealed the ways in which it really operated. As a result, the proletariat suffered from **false consciousness**—the workers did not truly understand capitalism and may have even believed, erroneously, that the system operated fairly and perhaps even to their benefit. Marx's work was devoted to providing the members of the proletariat with the knowledge they needed to see through these false ideas and achieve a truer understanding of the workings of capitalism.

Marx hypothesized that the workers could develop **class consciousness**, and such a collective consciousness would lead them to truly understand capitalism, their role in it, and their relationship to one another as well as to the capitalists. Class consciousness was a prerequisite of the revolutionary actions to be undertaken by the proletariat. In contrast, the capitalists could never achieve class consciousness because, in Marx's view, they were too deeply involved in capitalism to be able to see how it truly operated.

Marx's theories about capitalism are relevant to contemporary society. For example, in the United States, a capitalist country, the income gap that Marx predicted between those at the top of the economic system and the rest of the population is huge and growing. In 2020, the top 20 percent of the population in terms of household income had a greater average income than the rest of the population combined (U.S. Census 2020). As you can see in Figure 2.1, those at the top have greatly increased their average income since 1967; this is especially true of the top 5 percent of the population. Furthermore, the top 1 percent controlled almost 40 percent of the nation's wealth in 2020.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Mean Income Received by Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent, All Races: 1967–2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "Table H3. Mean Household Income Received by Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent." Retrieved January, 04, 2022 (<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-households.html>).

Marx also theorized that capitalism would force the capitalists to find the cheapest sources of labor and resources wherever they existed in the world. As Marx predicted, corporations continue to scour the globe for workers willing (or forced) to work for lower wages, driving down pay closer to home and reaping as much profit as possible from lower labor costs (among other things, including environmental controls and tax rates).

However, history has yet to bear out much of Marx's thinking about the demise of capitalism. For example, there has not yet been a widescale global proletarian revolution. This is the case, among other

reasons, because of the increasing ability of capitalism to put off such a revolution. Despite the threats to the proletariat, capitalism continues to exist, and Marx's ways of thinking about it, and the concepts he developed for that analysis, continue to be useful and highly influential throughout much of the world.

Max Weber

Although Karl Marx was an important social theorist, he developed most of his ideas outside the formal academic world. It took time for those ideas to gain recognition from scholars. In contrast, Max Weber (1864–1920; pronounced VAY-ber) was a leading professional academic of his day (Kalberg 2011, 2017). Weber, like Marx, devoted great attention to the economy. Many of Marx's ideas informed Weber's thinking, in large part because those ideas were finding a wide public audience at the time that Weber was active. Furthermore, Weber sought to understand the dramatic changes, inspired at least in part by Marx's ideas, taking place in Europe and elsewhere. Nevertheless, Weber rarely discussed Marx's theories explicitly. Thus, observers have characterized much of Weber's work as a debate with Marx's "ghost."

Weber's best-known work—*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1904–1905] 1958)—is part of his historical-comparative study of religion in various societies throughout the world. One of his main objectives was to analyze the relationship between the economy and religion. This is a good example of his debate with Marx. Marx had argued that religion is a force that serves to distract the masses from the problems caused by capitalism. In Marx's ([1843] 1970) famous words, religion "is the opium of the people." In comparison, Weber focused more explicitly on his argument of the central role religion had played in the Western world's economic development.

Weber argued that beginning in the seventeenth century, it was Protestantism in general, and especially Calvinism, that led to the rise of capitalism in the West and not in other areas of the world. Calvinists believed that people were predestined to go to heaven or hell; that is, they would end up in heaven or hell no matter what they did or did not do. Although they could not affect their destiny, they could uncover "signs" that indicated whether they were "saved" and going to heaven. Economic success was a particularly important sign that one was saved. However, isolated successful economic successes were not sufficient. Calvinists had to devote their lives to hard work and economic success, as well as to other "good works." At the same time, the Calvinists were quite frugal. All of this was central to the distinctive ethical system of the Calvinists, and more generally Protestants, that Weber referred to as the **Protestant ethic**.

Weber was interested not only in the Protestant ethic but also in the "spirit of capitalism" it helped spawn. The Protestant ethic was a system of ideas closely associated with religion, while the spirit of capitalism involved a transformation of those ideas into a perspective linked directly to the economy. As the economy came to be infused with the spirit of capitalism, it was transformed into a capitalist economic system. Eventually, however, the spirit of capitalism, and later capitalism itself, grew apart from its roots in Calvinism and the Protestant ethic. Capitalist thinking eventually could not accommodate such seemingly irrational forms of thought as ethics and religion.

Despite his attention to it, Weber was *not* interested in capitalism per se. He was more interested in the broader phenomenon of **rationalization**, or the process by which social structures are increasingly characterized by the most direct and efficient means to their ends. In Weber's view, this process was becoming more and more common in many sectors of society, including the economy, especially in bureaucracies and in the most rational economic system—capitalism. Capitalism is rational because of, for example, its continual efforts to find ways to produce more profitable products efficiently, with fewer inputs and simpler processes. A specific and early example of rationalization in capitalism is the assembly line, in which raw materials enter the line and finished products emerge at the end. Fewer workers performed very simple tasks in order to allow the assembly line to function efficiently. More recently, manufacturers have added more rational, "lean" production methods, such as the just-in-time inventory system (Janoski 2015). Instead of storing extra components in case they are needed, the just-in-time system relies on the delivery of materials just when they are needed in the production process. This makes for highly efficient use of storage space and the funds needed to purchase materials.

Weber saw rationalization as leading to an “iron cage” of rationalized systems. Such a cage makes it increasingly difficult for people to escape the process. This gives a clear sense of his negative opinion of rationalization. In this light, consider what he has to say about the cage-like character of capitalism:

Capitalism is today an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalist rules of action. (Weber [1904–1905] 1958, 54)

Such a negative view of rationalization and its constraints and socially harmful effects has persisted. It is frequently portrayed in popular entertainment, including George Orwell’s novel, and later movie, *1984* (1949), as well as movies such as *Brazil* (1985), *V for Vendetta* (2005), the *Hunger Games* series (2012–2015), and television programs like *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–present) and *Black Mirror* (2011–present).

In sum, while for Marx the key problems in the modern world were the exploitation and alienation that are part of the capitalist economy, for Weber the central problem was the control that rationalized structures such as capitalism exercise over us in virtually all aspects of our lives. Furthermore, while Marx was optimistic and had great hope for socialism and communism, Weber was a pessimist about most things. Socialism and communism, he felt, would not eliminate or prevent the iron cage from enveloping us: “Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now” (Weber [1919] 1958, 128).

Émile Durkheim

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) developed a theoretical orientation very different from those of his peers (Fournier 2013; Milibrandt and Pearce 2011). Like Marx and Weber, Durkheim focused on the macro end of the social continuum. However, while Marx and Weber were critical of the macro structures of prime concern to them—capitalism (Marx) and rationalized structures (Weber)—Durkheim generally had a positive view of macro structures.

For Durkheim, the major concern of the science of sociology was **social facts**. These are macro-level phenomena, such as social structures and cultural norms and values, that stand apart from people and, more important, impose themselves on people. Examples of social facts that impose themselves on you include the structures of your university and the national government. They are Durkheimian social facts because they have an independent existence and are able to force people to do things. Durkheim felt that such structures and their constraints were not only necessary but also highly desirable (at least to a point).

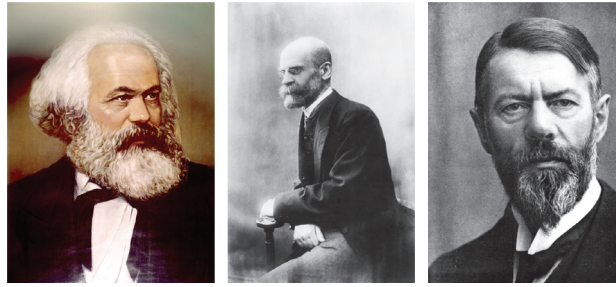
The differences among Marx, Weber, and Durkheim can be traced to each theorist’s sense of the essential character of human beings (see Figure 2.2). Both Marx and Weber had a generally positive sense of people as thoughtful, creative, and naturally social. They criticized social structures for stifling and distorting people’s innate characteristics. In contrast, Durkheim had a largely negative view of people as being slaves to their passions, such as lust and gluttony. Left to their own devices, he believed, people would seek to satisfy those passions. However, the satisfaction of one passion would simply lead to the need to satisfy other passions. This endless succession of passions could never be satisfied. In Durkheim’s view, passions should be limited, but people are unable to exercise this control themselves. They need social facts that are capable of limiting and controlling their passions.

The most important of these social facts is the **collective conscience**, or the set of beliefs shared by people throughout society (Bowring 2016). In Durkheim’s view, the collective conscience is highly desirable not only for society but also for individuals. For example, it is good for both society and individuals that we share the belief that we are not supposed to kill one another. Without a collective conscience, murderous passions would be left to run wild. Individuals would be destroyed, of course, and eventually so would society.

This leads us to Durkheim’s *Suicide* ([1897] 1951), one of the most famous research studies in the history of sociology. Because he was a sociologist, Durkheim did not focus on why any given individual committed suicide. Rather, he dealt with the more collective issue of suicide rates and why one group of people had a higher rate of suicide than another. The study was, in many ways, an ideal example of the power of sociological research. Using publicly available data, Durkheim found, for example, that

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber

Marx, Durkheim, and Weber were three of the most significant social theorists of their era. Though their theories were very different in many ways, all three were interested in the effect of social control on people.



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suicide rates were not related to psychological and biological factors such as alcoholism or race and heredity. The causes of differences in suicide rates were *not* to be found within individuals. Rather, suicide rates were related to social factors that exert negative pressure on the individual. These include collective feelings of rootlessness and normlessness. Suicide literally destroys individuals. The tendency to emulate celebrity suicides, such as those of designer Kate Spade and food celebrity Anthony Bourdain in 2018, led to greater interest in contagion as another social factor in increasing suicides (Keller 2018). Suicide also constitutes a threat to society because those who commit suicide are rejecting a key aspect of the collective conscience—that one should not kill oneself.

Suicide has at least two important characteristics. First, the study was designed, like much sociological research today, to contribute to the public understanding of an important sociological problem or issue. Second, and more important for the purposes of this introduction to sociology, it demonstrated the power of sociology to explain one of the most private and personal of acts. Suicide had previously been seen as the province of the field of psychology, and responsibility for the act was most often accorded to the individual. Durkheim believed that if sociology could be shown to be applicable to suicide, it could deal with any and all social phenomena.

Durkheim differentiated among four types of suicide. The most important one for our purposes is *anomic suicide*. **Anomie** is defined as people's feeling that they do not know what is expected of them in society—the feeling of being adrift in society without any clear or secure moorings. According to Durkheim, the risk of anomic suicide increases when people do not know what is expected of them, when society's regulation over them is low, and when their passions are allowed to run wild.

More generally, Durkheim believed that anomie is the defining problem of the modern world. In contrast to Marx and Weber, who worried about too much external control over people, Durkheim, at least in his thinking on anomie, worried about too little control, especially over passions. This broad view appeared in another famous work by Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893] 1964). He began by describing an early form of society with little division of labor. People there were held together by a type of solidarity—**mechanical solidarity**—stemming from the fact that they all did pretty much the same kinds of work, including hunting, gathering, and cooking. More important, people in this type of society had a strong collective conscience.

However, as Durkheim demonstrated, an increasing division of labor took place over time. Instead of continuing to do the same sorts of things, people began to specialize. Some became hunters, others farmers, and still others cooks. What held them together was not their similarities but their differences. That is, they had become more dependent on one another; people needed what others did and produced in order to survive. Durkheim called this later form of social organization **organic solidarity**. This can be a powerful form of solidarity, but it is accompanied by a decline in the power of the collective conscience. Because people were doing such different things, they no longer necessarily believed as strongly in the same set of ideas. This weakened collective conscience was a problem, Durkheim argued, because it progressively lost the power to control people's passions. Further, because of the weakened collective conscience, people were more likely to feel anomic and, among other things, were more likely to commit anomic suicide.

OTHER IMPORTANT EARLY THEORISTS

Although Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are the classical sociologists whose theories have most shaped contemporary sociology, several others made important contributions as well. Georg Simmel, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Thorstein Veblen all had grand theories of society, and you will see references to their ideas throughout this book.



Georg Simmel's interest in the forms taken by social interaction contributed to his influential theory that interaction defines people and society.

INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo

Georg Simmel

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) offered an important grand theory that parallels those of the thinkers discussed previously (Helle 2015), but his major importance in contemporary sociology lies in his contributions to micro theory. Simmel believed that sociologists should focus on the way in which conscious individuals interact and associate with one another (Scaff 2011).

Simmel was interested in the *forms* taken by social interaction. One such form involves the interaction between superiors and subordinates. An example would be the interaction between the managers at IKEA and those who stock the shelves at that chain. Simmel was also interested in the *types* of people who engage in interaction. For example, one type is the poor person and another is the rich person. For Simmel, it was the nature of the interaction between these two types of people and not the nature of the people themselves that was of greatest importance. Therefore, poverty is not about the nature of the poor person but about the kind of interaction that takes place between the poor and the rich. A poor person is defined, then, not as someone who lacks money but rather as someone who receives aid from a rich person.

There is great detail in Simmel's analyses of forms of interaction and types of interactants, as there is in his larger macro theory. But for our purposes here, the main point is that Simmel was of greatest importance to the microinteractionist theories to be discussed in this chapter and at other points in this book.

W. E. B. Du Bois

Just as Harriet Martineau was a pioneer in bringing gender to the forefront in sociology, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was crucial to the later focus of sociology on race (see Figure 2.3). Although Du Bois lived long into the modern era, his most important theoretical work was completed in the early twentieth century (Taylor 2011).

Du Bois is best known in sociology for his theoretical ideas but was also, like Durkheim and Weber, a pioneering researcher. In *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996), Du Bois reported on his studies of the residents of the Seventh Ward in Philadelphia. He used a variety of social scientific methods, including field research, observation, and interviews. He dealt with such basic concerns in sociology as marriage and the family, education, work, the church, housing, and politics, as well as such social problems as illiteracy and crime. Du Bois placed most of the blame for the problems experienced by Black Philadelphians on Whites, racism, and discrimination. However, he did not ignore the role played by Blacks themselves in these problems. One example was their tendency to visit White physicians, thereby adversely affecting the livelihood of Black physicians.

As for his theoretical contributions, Du Bois saw what he called the “race idea” as central. He saw a “color line” existing between Whites and Blacks in the United States. (He ultimately came to recognize that such a divide existed globally.) He argued that this barrier was physical in the sense that Blacks could be distinguished visually, through their darker skin color, from White Americans. The barrier was also political in that much of the White population did not see Blacks as “true” Americans. As a result, they denied Blacks many political rights, such as the right to vote. And the barrier was psychological because, among other things, Blacks found it difficult to see themselves in ways other than the ways in which White society saw them.

FIGURE 2.3 ■ W. E. B. Du Bois and Harriet Martineau

Du Bois and Martineau were essential to efforts to bring a focus on race and gender, respectively, to the field of sociology.



Getty Images/Bettman

One of Du Bois's goals, especially in *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1966), was to lift the veil of race and give Whites a glimpse of “Negroes” in America. He also wanted to show Blacks that they could see themselves in a different way, especially outside the view that White society had prescribed for them. Politically, he hoped for the day when the veil would be lifted forever, thereby freeing Blacks. However, he did understand that destroying the veil of race would require a great deal of time and effort.

Another of Du Bois's important ideas is **double consciousness**. By this he meant that Black Americans have a sense of “two-ness,” of being American and of being Black. Black Americans want to tear down the barriers that confront them but do not want to give up their identity, traditions, knowledge, and experience. That is, Black Americans are both inside and outside dominant, White American society. Double consciousness results in a sense among Black Americans that they are characterized by “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals” (Du Bois [1903] 1966, 5).

Double consciousness obviously produces great tension for Black Americans, much greater than the tensions felt by White Americans in regard to their race. However, it also gives Black Americans unusual insights into themselves, White Americans, and American society in general. Du Bois urged Black Americans to reach full maturity as a social group by reconciling and integrating these two conflicting aspects of their selves.

The idea of double consciousness has much broader applicability than just to Black Americans. Other racial and ethnic minorities can be seen as having such a double consciousness—for example, of being Hispanic and American. Similarly, women likely see themselves as both females and Americans. This leads us to wonder: Who does *not* have double consciousness? It also leads to the view that Du Bois did not go nearly far enough with this idea. There may be more, perhaps many more, than two consciousnesses. Consider, for example, the quadruple consciousness of a *female* immigrant from *Guatemala* who is *Hispanic* and has become a *U.S. citizen*.

Thorstein Veblen

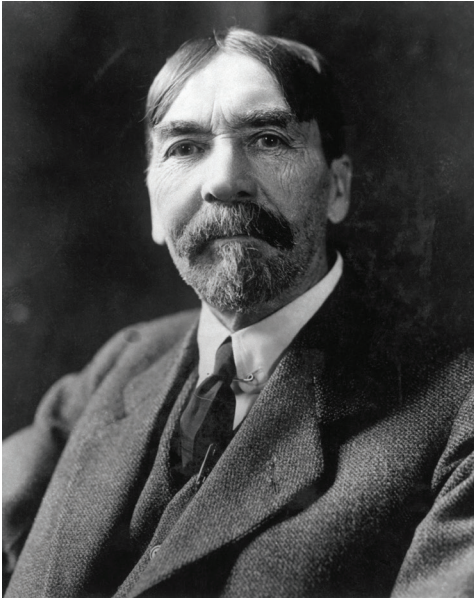
Like many of the other figures discussed in this chapter, Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) had a broader theory (McCormick 2011), but given that one of our focuses in this book is on consumption, we address here only the ideas associated with his most famous book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen [1899] 1994).

One of Thorstein Veblen's major concerns is the ways in which the upper classes demonstrate their wealth. One way to show off wealth is through *conspicuous leisure*, or doing things that demonstrate quite publicly that one does not need to do what most people consider to be work. Veblen believed that the wealthy want to demonstrate to all that they can afford to waste time,

often a great deal of time. Sitting on one's porch sipping margaritas, perhaps in "Margaritaville," having workers tend to one's lawn, and frequently playing golf at expensive golf clubs would be examples of conspicuous leisure. However, the problem with conspicuous leisure is that it is often difficult for very many others to witness these displays (though in contemporary times, increasingly easier through the use of social media).

Thus, over time the focus for the wealthy shifts from publicly demonstrating a waste of time to publicly demonstrating a waste of money. (Compare this set of values to the frugality of the Calvinists studied by Weber.) The waste of money is central to Veblen's most famous idea, conspicuous consumption. It is much easier for others to see conspicuous consumption than it is for them to see conspicuous leisure. Examples include building extravagant homes, such as David and Jackie Siegel's 90,000-square-foot mansion (named Versailles) in Orlando, Florida; driving around one's neighborhood in a Porsche; and wearing Dolce & Gabbana clothing with the D&G logo visible to all. The well-to-do, Veblen's "leisure class," stand at the top of a society's social class system. Many in the social classes below the wealthy, the middle and lower classes, copy the leisure class. For example, people in lower social classes might build relatively inexpensive McMansions or buy cheap knockoffs of D&G clothing.

Veblen is important because he focused on consumption at a time when it was largely ignored by other social theorists. Furthermore, his specific ideas, especially conspicuous consumption, continue to be applied to the social world.



Thorstein Veblen theorized that conspicuous consumption is a way for the wealthy to show off their wealth by purchasing expensive, highly visible houses, cars, jewelry, and clothing, among many other things.

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CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

As sociology has developed and grown as a discipline, the grand theories of earlier sociologists have evolved and branched out into dozens of newer theories. The work of the classical theorists has influenced each of these theories. For example, Marx's thinking on the relationship between capitalists and the proletariat strongly affected conflict/critical theory, and Simmel's micro-sociological ideas on forms and types of interaction helped shape inter/actionist theories. As Table 2.1 shows, these contemporary theories and the others reviewed in the rest of this chapter can be categorized under three broad headings: structural/functional, conflict/critical, and inter/actionist theories.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Major Sociological Theories

Structural/Functional Theories	Conflict/Critical Theories	Inter/Actionist Theories
Structural-functionalism	Conflict theory Critical theory	Symbolic interactionism
Structuralism	Feminist theory Queer theory Critical theories of race and racism Postmodern theory	Ethnomethodology Exchange theory Rational choice theory

Structural/Functional Theories

Structural/functional theories have evolved out of the observation and analysis of large-scale social phenomena. These phenomena include the state and the culture, the latter encompassing the ideas and objects that allow people to carry out their collective lives. The two major theories under the broad heading of structural/functional theories are *structural-functionalism*, which looks at both social structures and their functions, and *structuralism*, which concerns itself solely with social structures, without concern for their functions. Note that while the names sound the same, structural-functionalism is one theory under the broader heading of structural/functional theories.

Structural-Functionalism

Structural-functionalism focuses on social structures as well as the functions that such structures perform. Structural-functionalists are influenced by the work of, among others, Émile Durkheim, who discussed, for example, the functions of and structural limits placed on deviance. Structural-functional theorists start out with a positive view of social structures. In the case of the sociology of deviance, those structures might include the military, the police, and the prison system. Structural-functional theorists also assert that those structures are desirable, necessary, and even impossible to do without. However, as you will see later, not all sociologists view social structures as completely positive.

Structural-functionalism tends to be a “conservative” theory. The dominant view is that if given structures exist and are functional—and it is often assumed that if they exist, they are functional—they ought to be retained and conserved.

A series of well-known and useful concepts have been developed by structural-functionalists, especially Robert Merton ([1949] 1968). These concepts are easily explained in the context of globalization. Specifically, they can be applied to issues such as border controls and the passports needed to pass through them, customs charges such as tariffs, and even the physical barriers at borders, such as the highly debated “wall” between many parts of the United States and Mexico.

One central concept in Merton’s version of structural-functionalism is function. **Functions** are the observable, positive consequences of a structure that help it survive, adapt, and adjust. National borders are functional in various ways. For example, the passport controls at borders allow a country to monitor who is entering the country and to refuse entry to those it considers undesirable or dangerous. This function has become increasingly important in the era of global terrorism. Some of the individuals who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks on the United States entered the country by passing without notice through passport controls. Obviously, those controls were deficient. Now, however, more stringent passport and border controls serve the function of keeping out most other potential foreign terrorists. However, they are of no help with domestic terrorists, or those already living within a country’s borders.

Structural-functionalism is greatly enriched when we add the concept of **dysfunctions**, which are observable consequences that negatively affect the ability of a given system to survive, adapt, or adjust. Although border and passport controls clearly have functions, they also have dysfunctions. After 9/11, Congress passed many immigration-related acts. As a result, it has become much more difficult for everyone to enter the United States (Kurzban 2006). This is true not only for potential terrorists but also for legitimate workers, businesspeople, tourists, and family members. As a result, many talented workers and businesspeople (and tourists) from other countries have decided to go elsewhere in the world, where there are fewer restrictions on their ability to come and go. However, large numbers of students continue to flock to the United States. Table 2.2 lists the top 10 countries of origin of international students attending school in the United States. Note the dominance of students from China.

The fact that both functions and dysfunctions are associated with structures raises the issue of the relative weight of the functions and the dysfunctions. How can we determine whether a given structure is predominantly functional or dysfunctional? In terms of the tightening of border controls, we would need to weigh the benefits of keeping out potential terrorists against the losses in international business transactions and university enrollments by overseas students. Such weightings are never easy.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Top 10 Countries of Origin of International Students in the United States, 2019–2020

Rank	Country of Origin	Number of Students	Percentage of Total
1	China	373,000	34.6
2	India	193,000	18.0
3	South Korea	50,000	4.6
4	Saudi Arabia	31,000	2.9
5	Canada	26,000	2.4
6	Vietnam	24,000	2.2
7	Taiwan	24,000	2.2
8	Japan	18,000	1.6
9	Brazil	17,000	1.6
10	Mexico	14,000	1.3

Source: Migration Policy Institute. 2021. "International Students in the United States." (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students-united-states-2020>).

Merton further elaborated on his basic theory by differentiating between two types of functions. The first encompasses **manifest functions**, or positive consequences brought about consciously and purposely. For example, taxes (tariffs) are imposed on goods imported into a given country from elsewhere in the world in order to make the prices of those goods higher compared with domestic-made goods and thus protect domestic producers. That is a manifest function of tariffs. However, such actions often have **latent functions**, or unintended positive consequences. For example, when foreign products become more expensive and therefore less desirable, domestic manufacturers may produce more and perhaps better goods in their own country. In addition, more jobs for local citizens may be created. Note that in these examples, both manifest and latent functions, like all functions within the structural-functionalist perspective, are positive.

One more concept of note is the idea of **unanticipated consequences**, or consequences that are unexpected and can be either positive or, more importantly, negative. A negative unanticipated consequence of increased tariffs is a trade war. China, for example, has responded to an increase in U.S. tariffs by raising its own tariffs on U.S. imports. As the United States retaliates with new and still higher tariffs, we could be in the midst of an unanticipated, and probably undesirable, trade war involving the United States, China, and perhaps other nations.

Structuralism

A second structural/functional theory, **structuralism**, focuses on structures but is not concerned with their functions. In addition, while structural-functionalism focuses on quite visible structures, such as border fences, structuralism is more interested in the social impacts of hidden or underlying structures, such as the global economic order or gender relations. It adopts the view that these hidden structures determine what transpires on the surface of the social world. This perspective comes from the field of linguistics, which has largely adopted the view that the surface, the way we speak and express ourselves, is determined by an underlying grammatical system (Saussure [1916] 1966). A sociological example would be that behind-the-scenes actions of capitalists and the capitalist system determine the public positions taken by political leaders.

Marx can be seen as a structuralist because he was interested in the hidden structures that determine how capitalism works. So, for example, on the surface capitalism seems to operate to the benefit of all. However, hidden below the surface is a structure that operates mostly for the benefit of the capitalists, who exploit the workers and often pay them subsistence wages. Similarly, capitalists argue that the value of products is determined by supply and demand in the market. In contrast, Marx argued that

hidden beneath the surface is the fact that value comes from the labor that goes into the products, and this labor comes entirely from the workers.

Marx's frequent collaborator Friedrich Engels ([1884] 1970) looked at relationships between women and men and theorized that the structures of capitalism and patriarchy kept women subordinated to men. Engels assumed, as most writers of his time did, that family structure followed an evolutionary path from primitive to modern. In the early communistic society, members had multiple sexual pairings, and the uncertainty about who had fathered a child gave women power in the family and in society. Property passed from mother to child, and women were held in high esteem. However, as wealth began to accumulate and men gained control of agricultural production, men claimed more status. To guarantee the fidelity of the wife and therefore the paternity of the children, the social system evolved so that the wife was subjugated to male power and men sought to claim women as their own property. Monogamy eventually led to the even more restrictive marriage bond. Engels believed that with the advent of "marriage begins the abduction and purchase of women" ([1884] 1970, 735).

Engels believed that female oppression was rooted in the hidden and underlying structure of private property rights in capitalism. As a result, he thought that the key to ending that oppression was to abolish private property. Engels was arguably mistaken, however, in his conception of history. The period he describes as "primitive communism" arguably never really existed. Nevertheless, the connections he drew between gender inequality and the underlying structure of society have proved to be enduring, and many contemporary feminist theorists have built more sophisticated analyses on them (Chae 2014).

A structuralist approach is useful because it leads sociologists to look beyond the surface for underlying structures and realities, which determine what transpires on the surface. Thus, for example, military threats made by North Korea, and its test-firing of missiles, may not really be about military matters at all but instead about that country's failing economic system. North Korea may hope that the symbolic expression of military power will distract its citizens, strengthen its global prestige, frighten others, and perhaps coerce other countries, into providing economic aid. A very useful sociological idea in this context is debunking (Berger 1963). **Debunking** plays off the idea that visible social structures such as the state are mere facades. It is the task of the sociologist to debunk, or to look beneath and beyond, such facades. This is very similar to the approach taken by many structuralists, although there is an important difference. The goal of many structuralists is merely to understand the underlying structure of, for example, the state, language, or family systems. In contrast, debunking not only seeks such understanding but also critically analyzes the underlying reality and its impact on visible social structures. Sociologists accomplish debunking by questioning societally accepted goals and the accounts provided by those in positions of authority. For example, although the United States seems to emphasize peace, sociologists have pointed out that it has a hidden and powerful military-industrial complex with a vested interest in war, or at least in preparations for war (Ledbetter 2011). Many sociologists see debunking as going to the very heart of the field of sociology (Baehr and Gordon 2012).

Conflict/Critical Theories

The idea of debunking is clearly critical in nature and therefore a perfect lead-in to a discussion of conflict/critical theories. Several theories are discussed under this heading: conflict theory, critical theory, feminist theory, queer theory, critical theories of race and racism, and postmodern theory. They all tend to emphasize stresses, strains, and conflicts in society. They are critical of society in a variety of different ways, especially of the power exercised over less powerful members of society.

Conflict Theory

Perhaps the best known of these theories is **conflict theory**. It has roots in Marx's theory, and much of it can be seen as an inversion of structural-functionalism, which conflict theory was designed to compete with and to counteract. While structural-functionalism emphasizes what is positive about society, conflict theory focuses on its negative aspects. To the structural-functionalist, society is held together by consensus; virtually everyone accepts the social structure, its legitimacy, and its benefits. To the conflict theorist, in contrast, society is held together by coercion. Those adversely affected by society, especially economically, would rebel were it not for coercive forces such as the police, the courts, and the military.

A good example of conflict theory is to be found in the work of Ralf Dahrendorf (1959). Although he was strongly influenced by Marx, he was more strongly motivated by a desire to develop a viable alternative to structural-functionalism. For example, while structural-functionalists tend to see society as static, conflict theorists like Dahrendorf emphasize the ever-present possibility of change. Where structural-functionalists see the orderliness of society, conflict theorists see dissension and conflict everywhere. Finally, structural-functionalists focus on the sources of cohesion internal to society, while conflict theorists stress the coercion and power that holds together an otherwise fractious society.

Overall, conflict theorists like Dahrendorf see two basic sides to society—consensus and conflict—and believe that both are needed. Sociology therefore needs, at least in this view, two different theories: conflict theory and “consensus” (or structural-functional) theory.

Dahrendorf offered a very sociological view of authority, arguing that it resides not in individuals (e.g., Joe Biden) but in positions (e.g., the presidency of the United States) and in various associations of people. In his view, those associations are controlled by a hierarchy of authority positions and the people who occupy them. However, there are many such associations in any society. Thus, a person may be in authority in one type of association but be subordinate in many others. For example, your professor might have authority in the classroom, but be subordinate to the head of the university, or perhaps to their parents or spouse.

What most interested Dahrendorf was the potential for conflict between those in positions of authority and those in subordinate positions. They usually have very different interests. Like authority, those interests are not characteristics of individuals but rather are linked to the positions they hold. Thus, the top management of a retail or fast-food corporation such as Walmart or McDonald’s is interested in making the corporation more profitable by keeping wages low. In contrast, those who hold such low-level jobs as cashier or stock clerk are interested in increasing their wages to meet basic needs. Because of this inherent tension and conflict, authority within associations is always tenuous.

In general, the interests of those involved in associations are unconscious, but at times they become conscious and therefore more likely to lead to overt conflict. *Conflict groups* may form, as when a group of baristas goes on strike against Starbucks. The coalitions formed out of resistance efforts often increase cohesion among group members, further uniting them and bolstering the strength of the movement (Coser 1956). The actions of conflict groups can change society, as well as elements of society such as the Starbucks corporation, sometimes quite radically.

Critical Theory

While Marx’s work was critical of the capitalist economy, **critical theory** shifts the focus to culture. Marx believed that culture is shaped by the economic system. In contrast, the critical school has argued that by the early twentieth century, and at an ever-accelerating rate to this day, culture has succeeded in becoming important in its own right. Furthermore, in many ways it has come to be more important than the economic system. Instead of being controlled by the capitalist economy, more of us are controlled—and controlled more often—by culture in general, specifically by the culture industry.

The **culture industry**, in Weber’s sense, consists of the rationalized and bureaucratized structures that control modern culture. In their early years, the 1920s and 1930s, critical theorists focused on radio, magazines, and movies. Today, movies remain important, but the focus has shifted to television and various aspects of the internet, especially social media. These are critiqued for producing, or serving as an outlet for, **mass culture**, or cultural elements that are administered by organizations, lack spontaneity, and are phony. Two features of mass culture and its dissemination by the culture industry are of particular concern to critical theorists:

- *Falseness*. True culture should emanate from the people, but mass culture involves prepackaged sets of ideas that falsify reality. The so-called reality shows (e.g., *Survivor*) are a contemporary example of mass culture. These programs are also highly formulaic. They are presented as if they are authentic, but in fact they are scripted, highly controlled, and selectively edited—although in a different way than fictional dramas, comedies, and soap

operas are. They are also false in the sense that they give consumers of mass culture the sense that there is a quick and easy route to fame and fortune.

- *Repressiveness.* Like Marx, the critical theorists feel that the masses need to be informed about things such as the falseness of culture so that they can develop a clear sense of society's failings and the need to rebel against them.

However, the effect of mass culture is to pacify, stupefy, and repress the masses so that they are far less likely to demand social change. Those who rush home nightly to catch up on their favorite reality TV shows are unlikely to have much interest in, or time for, revolutionary activities, or even civic activities and reforms. Additionally, according to some theorists, the culture industry has succeeded in creating a class of corporate brands (e.g., Facebook, TikTok) that are globally recognized and sought after as cultural symbols (Lash and Lury 2007). Instead of engaging in revolutionary activities, many people are striving to keep up with and acquire the latest and hottest brands.

Critical theory can be applied to some of the newest media forms, such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and especially Facebook (Denegri-Knott and Zwick 2012). Despite there being plenty of false and stupefying content on these sites, along with all the educational material, the sites are not totally controlled by large rationalized bureaucracies—at least not yet. Almost all the content that appears on sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter is provided by those who also consume material on the sites. The sites exercise little control over original content (an issue that is becoming increasingly heavily debated); that content is arguably spontaneously produced by those who use the sites. It's tempting to conclude that these new aspects of the culture industry are not assailable from a traditional critical theory perspective. Sites such as Facebook structure what is to be found there, especially through the use of algorithms. In addition, at least some of that which is to be found there is false. Seemingly relevant here is the idea of “fake news” made famous by Donald Trump and now employed by politicians in many other countries. However, the label of fake news was mainly applied by Trump to the mainstream media (e.g., *New York Times*, CNN), and it arguably was created to further stupefy people by demeaning the importance of news from relatively balanced sources.

Yet even if the content is not produced by the culture industry, the content is disseminated by it. So although many websites have yet to become profitable, they have come to be worth many billions of dollars each because of investors' belief in their future profitability. More important, the masses are pacified, repressed, and stupefied by spending endless hours buying and selling on eBay, watching YouTube videos, updating their Facebook pages, creating TikTok videos, and following day-to-day, even minute-by-minute, developments in the lives of others. Similar things could be said about Twitter's tweets, which inform us instantaneously that, among other things, one of our friends has gotten a haircut or a manicure. Although people do find friends, learn useful things, and perhaps even foment revolutions on Twitter (as in the case of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 and, briefly, the quickly aborted coup d'état in Turkey in mid-2016), they also may spend, and likely waste, endless amounts of time on it. Not infrequently, they also may find that corporations are using increasingly sophisticated online techniques to target them and to get them to consume their products.

Feminist Theory

Historically, male social theorists have received the most attention (one exception, mentioned previously, is Harriet Martineau), and to a large (though decreasing) extent, that is still the case today. Not surprisingly, then, social theories in the main have downplayed or ignored women and the distinctive problems they face (one exception is the work of Engels discussed previously). Many social theories have also tended to ignore gender more generally. Specifically, they have neglected to critically examine how femininity (and masculinity) are part of everything from social structures and institutions to everyday interactions. Feminist theorists point up and attempt to rectify the masculine bias built into most social theories. Similar to the broad range of sociological theories you have already encountered is a large and growing number of feminist theories that deal with a wide range of social issues (Adichie 2015; Bromley 2012; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2014; see also the journal *Feminist Theory*). A central aspect of **feminist theory** in general is the critique of patriarchy (male dominance) and the

problems it poses not only for women but also for men. Feminist theory also offers ideas on how everyone's (women's *and* men's) situation can be bettered, if not revolutionized.

One fundamental debate within feminist theory is whether gender inequality causes or results from gender differences. A few feminist theorists (e.g., Rossi 1983) believe that there are *essential* (or biologically determined) differences between men's and women's behavior and that gender inequality is a result of the social devaluing of female characteristics (such as nurturing). But the majority of feminist scholars argue that gender differences are *socially constructed*. In other words, the differences we see in behavior between men and women are not biologically determined but rather created socially.

Even feminist theorists who agree that gender differences are socially constructed disagree on the underlying causes. One view is that men, as the dominant group in society, have defined gender in such a way as to purposely restrain and subordinate women. Another view holds that social structures such as capitalist organizations and patriarchal families have evolved to favor men and traditionally male roles. Both structures benefit from the uncompensated labor of women, so there is little incentive for men as a dominant group to change the status quo. Clearly these perspectives all involve a critical orientation.

Despite the many global and individual changes in women's lives over the almost two centuries since professional academic sociology came into existence, there is also a broad consensus among feminist theorists that women continue to face extraordinary problems related directly to gender inequality. As you will learn about more in Chapter 10, these problems include, among innumerable others, a persistent wage gap between men and women in most countries and in most fields and systematic and widespread rape by invading forces in wartime. These extraordinary problems require extraordinary solutions. However, feminist theories vary in the degree to which they support dramatic, even revolutionary, changes in women's (and men's) situation. Some feminist theories suggest that the solution to gender inequality is to change social structures and institutions so that they are more inclusive of women and allow more gender diversity. Other feminist theories argue that because those very structures and institutions create gender difference and inequality, we must first deconstruct and then rebuild them in a wholly different way.

Women of color (and others) have sometimes been dissatisfied with feminist theory for not representing their interests very well. Several scholars argue that feminist theory generally reflects the perspective of White women while ignoring the unique experiences and viewpoints of women of color (Collins 2000; hooks 2000; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Zinn 2012). Similarly, studies related to race tend to focus largely (or wholly) on the position of men. Thus, many contemporary feminists have advocated for scholarship that takes into account not just gender but also how it intersects with race and ethnicity, social class, and sexuality. The upcoming discussion of critical theories of race and racism provides more detail on this view.

Queer Theory

The term *queer* was originally used as a negative term for gay men. Contemporary gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, trans, and others whose identities fall outside the gender and sexual mainstream have reclaimed the label *queer*, but now with a positive connotation. However, queer theory is *not* a theory of queer folks. As Ryan (2020) notes, "While the term 'queer' has also become a shorthand for those lying outside the dominant sex/gender/sexuality paradigm, in the sense of queer theory it is meant more to imply 'queering' something, that is to say questioning it, turning it inside out, and decentering it from the norm" (79).

Queer theory is based on the argument that there are no fixed and stable identities that determine who we are (McCann 2016; Fikry and Ryan 2015). The theory also unsettles identities that have long been thought to be fixed, stable, or natural, especially those formed through binaries (like man/woman, or gay/straight). Among others, it unsettles *queers* as a noun, as well as gender identities in general (Butler 1990). It seeks to question what it means to have an identity. In another sense, queer theory also seeks to decenter the core and to problematize that which is usually considered "normal." It leaves everything up for question and puts even our base assumptions under investigation.

As mentioned, queer theory does not focus exclusively on homosexuality. Instead it is willing to look at different aspects of social life through a sexual lens and to investigate the ways in which sexuality

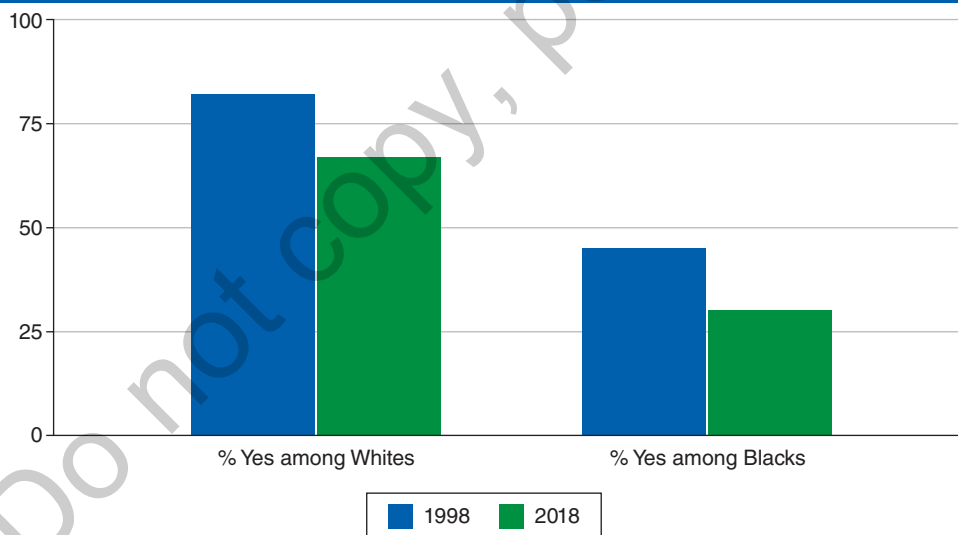
is embodied in those social institutions. This can even include areas of social life that are not typically seen as sexual, like archaeology (Dowson 2009), or even accounting (Rumens 2016). The aim is to show how sexuality, rather than being a distinct component of the social, is inextricably intertwined with the social. Thus, queer theory sees the sexual as a part of every aspect of our social lives and not just a distinct area of our personal lives.

Critical Theories of Race and Racism

As we saw earlier, W. E. B. Du Bois was a pioneer in the study of race and racism. In recent years, this perspective has blossomed in sociology under the heading of **critical theories of race and racism** (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Slatton and Feagin 2019). Theorists who adopt this perspective argue that race continues to matter globally and that racism continues to have adverse effects on people of color. Given its history of slavery and racism, the United States has often been singled out for analysis using this theory.

Some commentators have argued that racism today is of little more than historical interest because White Americans have become “color blind.” Those who adopt this point of view argue that we have come to ignore skin color when discussing social groups and that skin color is no longer being used in hiring or admissions policies. However, critical theorists of race and racism (as well as most empirical evidence) disagree. They argue that although skin color has nothing to do with a person’s physical or intellectual abilities, color blindness ignores the past and present realities facing racial minorities, including the social consequences of years of racial discrimination. As a result, critics of the claim of color blindness argue that it is little more than a “new racism,” a smoke screen that allows Whites to practice and perpetuate racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2009, 2015). See the differing perceptions about employment opportunities illustrated in Figure 2.4, for example. The vast majority of White Americans believe that there is equal employment opportunity, but only a minority of Black Americans subscribe to that view. The White belief in the smoke screen of equal opportunity serves to rationalize continued discrimination against Blacks.

FIGURE 2.4 ■ Belief That Blacks Have Equal Job Opportunities, 1998 and 2018



Source: Gallup. 2019. “Fewer See Equal Opportunity for Blacks in Jobs, Housing.” (<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/246137/fewer-equal-opportunity-blacks-jobs-housing.aspx>). <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/e/2PACX-1vSEZXT30gNj3B86zm58tdM4pJIBIoQJK61nQvzaPuveKtQULfJ53DBayIKZRbqw3Z2CZtxMTVGf8KnB/pubhtml>

The idea that racism continues has been very much in the news in recent years, especially with the murder of many people of color by White police officers. It has also become an issue associated with a number of politicians, most notably Donald Trump. It began haunting Trump in 2016 (and since) as he emerged victorious in the presidential campaign to replace a Black president, Barack Obama. During the campaign, Trump was accused of using “dog whistles” to appeal to White racists and others opposed to Obama and his designated successor, Hillary Clinton. *Dog whistles* are old-fashioned biased

statements repackaged to make them more acceptable and to hide the true message from all but those with such biases. For example, at least initially, Trump refused to disavow the Ku Klux Klan and one of its most public figures, David Duke. He has since gone on to have strong associations with a number of proclaimed White Nationalists (both individuals and groups). That refusal, and those associations, could be considered dog whistles to White racists and other White supporters of his candidacy.

Of particular importance to recent work in this area is the idea of **intersectionality** (Collins and Bilge 2016), which points to the fact that people are affected, often adversely, not only by their race but also by their gender, sexual orientation, class, age, global location, and a variety of other demographic factors. The confluence, or intersection, of these various statuses and the inequality and oppression associated with combinations of them are what matter most. Not only are we unable to deal with race, gender, class, and so on separately; we also cannot gain an understanding of oppression by simply adding them together. For example, we cannot understand the position of a poor, Black, disabled lesbian simply by considering the situation of being poor, Black, disabled, or lesbian on their own. It is the combination of those identities that makes the oppression unique.

Postmodern Theory

Postmodern theory has many elements that fit well under the heading of critical theory, although there is more to it than critique. The term *postmodern* is used in various ways in relation to social theory. **Postmodernity**, for instance, is the state of society beyond the “modern era,” which was the era analyzed by the classical social theorists. Among the characteristics of the modern world is rationality, as discussed in Weber’s work. The postmodern world is less rational, nonrational, or even irrational. For example, although in the modern world groups such as the proletariat can plan in a rational manner to overthrow capitalism, in the postmodern world such changes come about accidentally or are simply fated to occur (Baudrillard [1983] 1990; Kellner 2011). Although modernity is characterized by a highly consistent lifestyle, postmodernity is characterized by eclecticism in what we eat, how we dress, and what sorts of music we listen to (Lyotard [1979] 1984). This eclecticism has been fostered by, among others, the internet, which gives people ready access to many more different things (e.g., news, opinion, fashion, music genres) that were not so easily available in the pre-internet age.

Postmodernism refers to the emergence of new and different cultural forms in music, movies, art, architecture, and the like. One characteristic of these new cultural forms is pastiche. “Modern” movies, for example, are told in a linear fashion, and “modern” art is made up of internally consistent elements. But postmodern cultural forms are pastiches that combine very different elements. From a modern perspective, those elements often seem incompatible with one another. Thus, postmodern buildings combine classic and modern styles. Postmodern movies deal with historical realities but also include very modern elements, such as songs from the present day. *Her* (2013) takes place in futuristic Los Angeles, where a man develops a romantic relationship with a “female” computer operating system. Episodes of *The Simpsons* often portray characters from different time periods, such as former U.S. presidents, in modern-day situations and most feature a pastiche of high- and low-brow cultural references. In addition, Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie exist in a timeless, postmodern space where they never age.

Postmodern theory is a theoretical orientation that is a reaction against modern theory. Postmodern theory tends to be expressed in nonrational ways. For example, it might take the form of a series of terse, often unrelated statements rather than a logical, well-argued volume or series of volumes (like the work of modern thinkers such as Marx and Weber). Postmodernists are opposed to the grand narratives—the broad depictions of history and society—offered by modern theorists (Ryan 2017). An example of such a narrative is Weber’s theory of the increasing rationalization of the world and the rise of an “iron cage” constraining our thoughts and activities. Instead, postmodernists tend to offer more limited, often unrelated, snapshots of the social world. In fact, postmodernists often deconstruct, or take apart, modern grand narratives. Postmodernists are also opposed to the scientific pretensions of much modern social theory. They adopt instead a nonscientific or even antiscientific approach to the social world. Feminist postmodernists reject the very language used by modern feminist scholars because words like *lesbian* have been constructed out of modern, male-centered thought. To some observers, the sociological study of deviance has all but disappeared because of postmodern conclusions that deviance

is a purely relative phenomenon, dependent strictly on the definitions of those who have the power to define what is deviant (Sumner 1994).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these differences, postmodern theory offers a new and important way of theorizing. Postmodern social theorists look at familiar social phenomena in different ways or adopt very different focuses for their work. For example, in his study of the history of prisons, Michel Foucault ([1975] 1979) was critical of the modernist view that criminal justice had grown progressively liberal. He contended that prisons had, in fact, grown increasingly oppressive through the use of techniques such as constant, enhanced surveillance of prisoners. Similarly, he argued against the traditional view that in the Victorian era people were sexually repressed; he found instead an explosion of sexuality in the Victorian era (Foucault 1978).

The most important postmodernist, Jean Baudrillard, argued that we are now living in a consumer society where much of our lives is defined not by our productive work but by what we consume and how we consume it. The postmodern world is, in fact, characterized by **hyperconsumption**, which involves consuming more than we need, more than we really want, and more than we can afford. The generally rising level of credit card debt around the world in recent decades is a sign of the hyperconsumption noted by Baudrillard. A more recent sign is found in “haul videos” posted online, mainly by young women, showing their “hauls” from given shopping trips accompanied by commentary on the products obtained.



This is not New York City but the hotel-casino called New York–New York in Las Vegas, Nevada. One hypothesis of postmodern theory is that we live in a world characterized by an increasing number of simulations of reality. How many others can you think of?

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Another of Baudrillard’s critical ideas that demonstrates the nature of postmodern social theory is simulation. A **simulation** is an inauthentic or fake version of something. Baudrillard saw the world as increasingly dominated by simulations. For example, when we eat at McDonald’s, we consume Chicken McNuggets, or simulated chicken. It is fake in the sense that it is often not meat from one chicken but bits of meat that come from many different chickens. When we go to Disney World, we enter via Main Street, a simulation of early America that is really a shopping mall. We also go on simulated submarine rides to see simulated sea life rather than going to a nearby aquarium to see “real” sea life. When we go to Las Vegas, we stay in hotel-casinos that are simulations of New York of the early to mid-twentieth century (New York–New York), Venice (the Venetian), and ancient Egypt (the Luxor). The idea that we increasingly consume simulations and live a simulated life is a powerful critique of

consumer society and, more generally, of the contemporary world. That is, not only are we consuming more; also, much of what we consume is fake.

Inter/Actionist Theories

The slash between *inter* and *action(ist)* in the heading to this section is meant to communicate the fact that we will deal with two closely related sets of theories here. The first consists of those theories that deal mainly with the interaction of two or more people (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and exchange theory). The second consists of those that focus more on the actions of individuals (rational choice theory). A common factor among these theories is that they tend to focus on the micro level of individuals and groups. This is in contrast to the theories discussed previously that tend to focus more on the macro structures of society.

Symbolic Interactionism

As the name suggests, **symbolic interactionism** is concerned with the interaction of two or more people through the use of symbols (Quist-Adade 2018). We all engage in mutual action—interaction—with many others on a daily basis, whether it be face-to-face or more indirectly via cell phone, e-mail, or social media. But interaction could not take place without symbols: words, gestures, internet memes (Benaim 2018; Fikry et. al. 2021), and even objects that stand for things. Symbols allow the communication of meaning among a group of people.

Although we can interact with one another without words, such as through physical gestures like the shrug of a shoulder, in the vast majority of cases we need and use words to interact. And words make many other symbols possible. For example, the Harley-Davidson brand has meaning because it symbolizes a particular type of motorcycle. Both the brand name and the motorcycle are further symbolized by nicknames such as “Harley” and “hog.”

Symbolic interactionism has several basic principles:

- Human beings have a great capacity for thought, which differentiates them from other animals (an idea that is heavily debated by others, including some sociologists). That innate capacity for thought is greatly shaped by social interaction. It is during social interaction that people acquire the symbolic meanings that allow them to exercise their distinctive ability to think. Those symbolic meanings in turn allow people to act and interact in ways that other animals arguably cannot.
- Symbolic meanings are not set in stone. People are able to modify them based on a given situation and their interpretation of it. A flag composed of the colors red, blue, yellow, orange, green, and purple, for example, is a symbol whose meaning can vary. For many, when in a particular order, it symbolizes the LGBTQ+ community. For some indigenous tribes in South America, it symbolizes their cultural heritage without reference to sexuality.
- People are able to modify symbolic meanings because of their unique ability to think. Symbolic interactionists frame *thinking* as people’s ability to interact with themselves. In that interaction with themselves, people are able to alter symbolic meanings. They are also able to examine various courses of action open to them in given situations, to assess the relative advantages and disadvantages of each, and then to choose among them.
- It is the pattern of those choices of individual action and interaction that is the basis of groups, larger structures such as bureaucracies, and society as a whole. Most generally, in this theoretical perspective, symbolic interaction is the basis of everything else in the social world.

Symbolic interactionists are interested in how various aspects of identity are created and sustained in social interaction. For example, symbolic interactionists argue that gender (like ethnicity or career identity) is something that we “do” or perform (West and Zimmerman 1987). For example, a male may take pains to act in a masculine way so that he will be seen as a man by both himself and others. In some respects, his behavior (which is socially determined) can be considered symbolic of attributes

commonly associated with the male sex (which is largely biologically determined). People who see his behavior can then simply relate to him as a man, according to the meaning of the symbolic behavior that has developed over time through innumerable interactions. Gender (i.e., masculinity and femininity) is thus both a result and a cause of social interaction.

Ethnomethodology

Although symbolic interactionism deals primarily with people's interactions, it is also concerned with the mental processes, such as mind and self, that are deeply implicated in these interactions. **Ethnomethodology** is another interactionist theory, but it focuses on what people *do* rather than on what they think (Liu 2012). The Greek root of the term *ethnomethodology* refers to people (*ethno*) and the everyday methods through which they accomplish their daily lives. In other words, ethnomethodologists study the ways in which people organize everyday life.

Ethnomethodologists regard people's lives and social worlds as practical accomplishments that are really quite extraordinary. For example, one ethnomethodological study of coffee drinkers attempted to understand their participation in a subculture of coffee connoisseurship (Manzo 2010). Learning to enjoy coffee is something of an accomplishment itself; taking that enjoyment to the next level and becoming a connoisseur requires even more doing.

Ethnomethodologists take a different view of largescale social structures than do structural-functionalists, who tend to see people and their actions as being highly constrained by those structures. Ethnomethodologists argue that this view tells us very little about what really goes on within structures such as courtrooms, hospitals, and police departments. Rather than being constrained, people act within these structures and go about much of their business using common sense rather than official procedures. They may even adapt those structures and rules to accomplish their goals. For example, an employee at Wal-Mart might violate the rules about handling returns in order to please a customer and make the process easier or less stressful. Police departments have rules about categorizing a death as a homicide or manslaughter. However, police officers often apply their own commonsense rules rather than organizational rules when interpreting the evidence.

Many ethnomethodologists study conversations and focus on three basic issues (Zimmerman 1988):

- *Vocal cues as an element of conversation.* Conversation involves not only words but also vocal cues, such as pauses, throat clearings, and silences. These nonverbal vocal behaviors can be important methods in making conversation. For example, one person may sit silently in order to force the other to speak. Or clearing one's throat may be meant to express disapproval of what the other person is saying.
- *Stable and orderly properties of conversations.* The people in conversation generally take turns speaking and know when it is their turn to talk. Ethnomethodologists might examine how those properties change when two strangers converse rather than two friends. One of their findings has been that a higher-status person is more likely to interrupt a lower-status person.
- *Actions necessary to maintain conversations.* The properties of conversation are not carved in stone. Those involved in a conversation can observe them, enforce them, or upset them. For example, turn taking is a stable and orderly property of a conversation, but in an actual conversation you need to act in order to get your turn to speak. Turn taking does not occur automatically.

The best-known example of an ethnomethodological approach relates to gender (O'Brien 2016; Stokoe 2006). Ethnomethodologists point out that people often erroneously think of gender as being biologically based. It is generally assumed that we do not have to do or say anything in order to be considered masculine or feminine; we are born that way. But, in fact, there are things we all do (e.g., the way we dress) and say (e.g., the tone of our voice) that allow us to accomplish being masculine or feminine. That is, being masculine or feminine is based on what people do on a regular basis. This is clearest in the case of those who are defined as being male or female at birth (based on biological characteristics) but then later do and say things that lead others to see them as belonging to another gender (based on social characteristics) other than the one most commonly associated with their assigned sex.

For example, the Dutch painter Einar Wegener enjoyed wearing feminine attire, which his wife, also a painter, discovered after he filled in for one of her models. With his wife's support he became the first man to undergo a sex reassignment operation, becoming the female Lili Elbe. In reality, we all say and do things that allow us to accomplish our gender (and, in certain ways, the “opposite” gender). If this is the case for gender, a great many other facts of our everyday lives can be analyzed as accomplishments.

Exchange Theory

Like ethnomethodologists, exchange theorists are not concerned with what goes on in people's minds and how that affects behavior. Instead, they are interested in the behavior itself and the rewards and costs associated with it (Molm, Whithama, and Melamed 2012). The key figure in **exchange theory**, George Homans (1910–1989), argued that instead of studying large-scale structures, sociologists should study the “elementary forms of social life” (Homans 1961, 13).

Exchange theorists are particularly interested in social behavior that usually involves two or more people and a variety of tangible and intangible exchanges. For example, you can reward someone who does you a favor with a tangible gift or with more intangible words of praise. Those exchanges are not always rewarding; they also can be punitive. You could, for example, punish someone who wrongs you by slapping them or complaining about them to mutual acquaintances.

In their actions and interactions, people are seen as rational profit seekers. Basically, people will continue on courses of action, or in interactions, in which the rewards are greater than the costs. Conversely, they will discontinue those in which the costs exceed the rewards. For example, people in search of a mate, especially a marriage partner, often choose to live in the city, even though the cost of living is higher, because there are more potential partners there. However, once they are married, they are more likely to move out of the city to where the costs are lower (Gautier, Svarer, and Teulings 2010). Although exchange theory retains an interest in the elementary forms of social behavior, over the years it has grown more concerned with how those forms lead to more complex social situations. That is, individual exchanges can become stable over time and develop into persistent **exchange relationships**. One particular type of exchange relationship is “hooking up,” or forming sexual relationships that are also sometimes called “friends with benefits.” For example, because you and another person find your initial sexual interactions rewarding, you may develop a pattern of repeat sexual interactions.

Exchange relationships, including hookups, rarely develop in isolation from other exchange relationships. Sociologists study how hooking up is not an isolated occurrence—for example, one place where it often happens is on college campuses, where it has been normalized (Kuperberg and Padgett 2015). All these exchange relationships may become so highly interconnected that they become a single network structure (Cook et al. 1983).

Key issues in such network structures, and in exchange relationships more generally, are the power that some members have over others and the dependency of some members (Molm 2007; Molm and Cook 1995). Exchange theorists are interested in studying the causes and effects of these status differences within exchange relationships and networks. For example, variations in the wealth, status, and power of individuals and their families affect the position they come to occupy in a social network and influence their ability to succeed educationally, financially, and occupationally (Lin 1999).

Rational Choice Theory

In **rational choice theory**, as in exchange theory, people are regarded as rational, but the focus is not on exchange, rewards, and costs. Rather, the basic principle in rational choice theory is that people act intentionally in order to achieve goals. People are seen as having purposes, as intending to do certain things. To achieve their goals, people have a variety of means available to them and choose among the available means on a rational basis. They choose the means that are likely to best satisfy their needs and wants; in other words, they choose on the basis of “utility” (Kroneberg and Kalter 2012). In the case of hookups, for example, we can easily imagine a series of potential purposes for hooking up, such as engaging in sexual exploration, having fun, and doing something sexual (presumably) without the risk of getting deeply involved emotionally.

There are two important constraints on the ability to act rationally (Friedman and Hechter 1988):

- *Access to scarce resources.* It is relatively easy for those with access to lots of resources to act rationally and reach their goals. Those who lack access to such resources are less likely to be able to act rationally in order to achieve their goals. A simple example: If you have access to money, you can rationally pursue the goal of purchasing food for dinner. However, without access to money, you will have a much harder time taking rational actions that will lead to the acquisition of food. Those with ample resources may be able to pursue two or more goals simultaneously (obtaining the money needed for dinner and for club hopping afterward with friends). However, those with few resources may have to forgo one goal (socializing with friends) in order to attain the other (getting enough money to eat).
- *Requirements of social structures.* The structures in which people find themselves—businesses, schools, hospitals—often have rules that restrict the actions available to those within the structures. For example, the need to work overtime or on weekends may restrict a person’s ability to socialize. Similarly, being a full-time student may limit one’s ability to earn enough money to always be able to obtain the kind of food one prefers to eat.

Rational choice theorists understand that people do not always act rationally. They argue, however, that their predictions will generally hold despite these occasional deviations (Coleman 1990; Zafirovski 2013). The degree to which people act rationally is one of the many topics that can be, and has been, researched by sociologists. It is to the general topic of sociological research that we turn in the next chapter.

SUMMARY

Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim are arguably the most important classical sociological theorists.

Marx focused the majority of his attention on macro issues, particularly the structure of capitalist society. Unlike Marx, Weber was most interested in bureaucracy and the process of rationalization. Durkheim believed that social structures and cultural norms and values exert control over individuals that is not only necessary but also desirable.

Among other early sociological theorists, Georg Simmel focused on micro-level issues, specifically interactions among individuals. W. E. B. Du Bois was a pioneering researcher of race in America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thorstein Veblen studied consumption, particularly the ways in which the rich show off their wealth through conspicuous consumption.

Three main schools of theory inform contemporary sociological theory: structural/functional, conflict/critical, and inter/actionist theories. Structural-functionalists such as Robert Merton are concerned with both social structures and the functions and dysfunctions the structures perform. They believe that society is held together by consensus. In contrast, structuralism studies the social impact of hidden or underlying structures.

Conflict/critical theories tend to emphasize societal struggles and inequality. Conflict theorists believe that society is held together by power and coercion. Critical theorists critically analyze culture and how it is used to pacify opposition. Feminist theory critiques the social situation confronting women and offers ideas on how women’s situation can be bettered, if not revolutionized. Queer theory stresses the broader idea that there are no fixed and stable identities. Critical theories of race and racism argue that race continues to matter and raise the issue of oppression at the intersection of gender, race, sexual orientation, and other social statuses. Postmodern theory is similarly critical of society for, among other things, coming to be dominated by simulations.

Inter/actionist theories deal with micro-level interactions among people. Symbolic interactionism, for instance, studies the effect of symbols, including words, on the interaction between two or more

people. Ethnomethodology focuses on what people do rather than on what they think and often analyzes conversations. Exchange theory looks not at what people think but at their behavior. Rational choice theory considers behavior to be based on rational evaluations of goals and the means to achieve them.

KEY TERMS

alienation	intersectionality
anomie	latent functions
capitalism	manifest functions
capitalists	mass culture
class consciousness	mechanical solidarity
collective conscience	organic solidarity
conflict theory	postmodernism
critical theories of race and racism	postmodernity
critical theory	postmodern theory
culture industry	proletariat
debunking	Protestant ethic
double consciousness	queer theory
dysfunctions	rational choice theory
ethnomethodology	rationalization
exchange relationships	simulation
exchange theory	social facts
exploitation	structural-functionalism
false consciousness	structuralism
feminist theory	symbolic interactionism
functions	theories
hyperconsumption	unanticipated consequences

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are theories, and how do sociologists use theories to make sense of the social world? In what ways are theories developed by sociologists better than your own theorizing?
2. According to Karl Marx, what are the differences between capitalists and the proletariat? How are workers alienated on the job and in the workplace? Do you think workers are alienated today? Why or why not?
3. Max Weber said that the world is becoming increasingly rationalized. What are the benefits and disadvantages of rationality? In what ways is McDonaldization (from Chapter 1) the same as, or different from, rationalization?
4. Why has our collective conscience weakened over time, according to Émile Durkheim? Do you think that globalization continues to weaken our collective conscience? Why or why not?
5. You live in a world increasingly dominated by consumption. How are the goods and services you consume reflective of Thorstein Veblen's concept of "conspicuous consumption"?
6. What are the functions and dysfunctions of using the internet to consume goods and services? On balance, do you think that consumption through the internet is positive or negative?
7. What is mass culture, and why are critical theorists concerned about the dissemination of mass culture? Do you think the internet and social networking sites contain elements of mass culture and are part of the "culture industry"?
8. Why is feminist theory considered to be a critical theory?

9. What would proponents of the critical theories of race and racism outlined in this chapter think of the racial “dog whistles” used by Donald Trump in the 2016 (and 2020) presidential campaign and throughout his presidency? Would they see this as an advance over the more overt racism evident in the past?
10. According to symbolic interactionist theory, why are symbols so important to our interactions? In what ways has language changed because of the development of the internet?

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