INTRODUCTION

Key Concepts

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

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

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

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

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

—Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Illustration 1.1 Alice in Wonderland
In the previous passage, the Pigeon had a theory—Alice is a serpent because she has a long neck and eats eggs. Alice, however, had a different theory—that she was a little girl. Yet, it was not the “facts” that were disputed in the above passage. Alice freely admitted that she had a long neck and ate eggs. So why did Alice and the Pigeon come to such different conclusions? Why didn’t the facts “speak for themselves”?

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

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

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

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

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

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

**WHAT IS SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?**

Theory is a system of generalized statements or propositions about phenomena. There are two additional features, however, that together distinguish scientific theories from other idea systems, such as those found in religion or philosophy. “Scientific” theories...
1. explain and predict the phenomena in question, and
2. produce testable and thus falsifiable hypotheses.

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

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

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

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

To better understand the development of sociology theory, it is important to briefly consider the historical context out of which these central questions grew.

The Enlightenment

Many of the seeds for what would become sociology were first planted during the Enlightenment, a period of remarkable intellectual development that originated in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (see Figure 1.1). The development of civil society (open spaces of debate relatively free from government control) and the quickening pace of the modern world enabled a newly emerging mass of literate citizens to think about the economic, political, and cultural conditions that shaped society. As a result, a number of long-standing ideas and beliefs about social life were turned upside down. The Enlightenment, however, was not so much a fixed set of ideas as it was a new attitude, a new method of thought. One of the most important aspects of this new attitude was an emphasis on reason that demanded the questioning and reexamination of received ideas and values regarding the physical world, human nature, and their relationship to God.

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

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Enlightenment thinkers did not set out to disprove the existence of God; with few exceptions, there were no admitted atheists during this period of European history. But though they did not deny that the universe was divinely created, they did deny that God and his work were inescutable. Instead, they viewed the universe as a mechanical system composed of matter in motion that obeyed natural laws that could be uncovered by means of methodical observation and empirical research. Thus, when Newton developed his theory of gravity, a giant leap forward in the development of mathematics and physics, he was offering proof of God’s existence. For Newton, only the intelligence of a divine power could have ordered the universe so perfectly around the sun as to prevent the planets from colliding under the forces of gravity (Armstrong 1993:303). Similarly, René Descartes was convinced that reason and mathematics could provide certainty of God, whose existence could be demonstrated rationally, much like a geometric proof. Faith and reason for these individuals were not irreconcilable. The heresy committed by the Enlightenment thinkers was their attempt to solve the mystery of God’s design of the natural world through the methodical, empirical discovery of eternal laws. Miracles were for the ignorant and superstitious.
Later Enlightenment thinkers, inspired by growing sophistication within the fields of physics and mathematics, would begin to advance a view of science that sought to uncover not God’s imprint in the universe but rather the natural laws of matter that ordered the universe independent of the will of a divine Creator. Scientific inquiry was no longer tied to proving God’s existence. Belief in the existence of God
was becoming more a private matter of conviction and conscience that could not be subjected to rational proof, but rested instead on faith. Some of the most renowned physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers of modern Western societies, from Pascal and Spinoza to Kant, Diderot, and Hume, would come to see God as a comforting idea that could offer certainty and meaning in the world or as a way to represent the summation of the causal laws and principles that ordered the universe. God, however, was not understood as a transcendent, omniscient Being who was responsible for the design of the universe and all that happens in it. And if the existence of God could not be logically or scientifically proven, then faith in his existence mattered little in explanations of reality (Armstrong 1994:311–315, 341–343). There was no longer any room left in reason and science for God.

The rise of science and empiricism ushered in by the Enlightenment would give birth to sociology in the mid-19th century. The central idea behind the emerging discipline was that society could be the subject of scientific examination in the same manner as biological organisms or the physical properties of material objects. Indeed, the French intellectual Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who coined the term “sociology” in 1839, also used the term “social physics” to refer to this new discipline and his organic conceptualization of society. The term “social physics” reflects the Enlightenment view that the discipline of sociology parallels other natural sciences. Comte argued that, like natural scientists, sociologists should uncover, rationally and scientifically, the laws of the social world.1 For Enlighteners, the main difference between scientific knowledge and either theological explanation or mere conjecture is that scientific knowledge can be tested. Thus, for Comte, the new science of society—sociology—involving (1) the analysis of the central elements and functions of social systems, using (2) concrete historical and comparative methods in order to (3) establish testable generalizations about them (Fletcher 1966:14).2

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

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

1Physics is often considered the most scientific and rational of all the natural sciences because it focuses on the basic elements of matter and energy and their interactions.

2Of course, the scientists of the Enlightenment were not uninfluenced by subjectivity or morality. Rather, as Seidman (1994:30–31) points out, paradoxically, the Enlighteners sacralized science, progress, and reason. They deified the creators of science such as Galileo and Newton, and fervently believed that “science” could resolve all social problems and restore social order, which is itself a type of “faith.”
In a parallel way, Durkheim was interested in both objective or external social facts and the more subjective elements of society, such as feelings of solidarity or commitment to a moral code. Akin to Rousseau, Durkheim believed that it was these subjective elements that ultimately held societies together. Similarly, Karl Marx (1818–1883), who is another of sociology’s core figures (though he saw himself as an economist and social critic), fashioned an economic philosophy that was at once rooted in science and humanist prophecy. Marx analyzed not only the economic dynamics of capitalism, but also the social and moral problems inherent to the capitalist system. Additionally, another of sociology’s core theorists, Max Weber (1864–1920), combined a methodical, scientific approach with a concern about both the material conditions and idea systems of modern societies.

**Economic and Political Revolutions**

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

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

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

The rise of industrialization, however, dramatically reshaped the organization of society. Most of the world’s population was rural before the Industrial Revolution, but by the mid-nineteenth century, half of the population of England lived in cities. As shown in Figure 1.2, the population of London grew from less than a million in 1800 to more than six and a half million in 1901. So too throughout Europe the population was becoming increasingly urban. By the end of the nineteenth century, half of the population of Europe lived in cities. Moreover, while there were scarcely any cities in Europe with populations of 100,000 in 1800, there were more than 150 cities that size a century later. This massive internal migration resulted from large numbers of people leaving farms and agricultural work to become wage earners in factories in the rapidly growing cities. The shift to factory production and wage labor meant that families were no longer the center of economic activity. Instead of producing their own goods for their own needs, families depended for their survival on impersonal labor and commodity markets. At the same time, states were establishing public bureaucracies, staffed by trained “functionaries,” to provide a standardized education for children and to adjudicate disputes, punish rule violators, and guarantee recently enshrined individual rights. As a result of these transformations, the family was becoming increasingly privatized; its range of influence confined more and more to its own closed doors. The receding sway of
family and community morality was coupled with the decline of the Church and religious worldviews. In their place came markets and bureaucratic organizations speaking their language of competition, profit, individual success, and instrumental efficiency. With the reorganization of society around the twin pillars of mass production and commerce, the “seven deadly sins became lively capitalist virtues: avarice became acumen; sloth, leisure; and pride, ambition” (Brown 1987:57).

The shift from agricultural to factory production had particularly profound effects on individuals. Technological changes brought ever-more-efficient machines and a growing routinization of tasks. For instance, with the introduction of the power loom in the textile industry, an unskilled worker could produce three and a half times as much as could the best handloom weaver. However, this rise in efficiency came at a tremendous human cost. Mechanized production reduced both the number of jobs available and the technical skills needed for work in the factory. Workers engaged in increasingly specialized and repetitive tasks that deprived them of meaningful connections with other workers, with the commodities they produced, and even with their own abilities. As work became more uniform, so did the workers themselves who were as interchangeable as the mass-produced commodities they produced. A few profited enormously, but most worked long hours for low wages. Accidents were frequent and often quite serious. Workers were harshly punished and their wages were docked for the slightest mistakes. Women and children worked alongside men in noisy, unsafe conditions. Most factories were dirty, poorly ventilated and lit, and dangerous. From the 1760s onward, labor disputes began to result in sporadic outbreaks of violent resistance. Perhaps most famous were the episodes of machine-breaking that occurred in England in what has since become known as the Luddite disturbances.

Karl Marx was particularly concerned about the economic changes and disorganizing social effects that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Marx not only wrote articles and
books on the harsh conditions faced by workers under capitalism, but also was a political activist who
helped organize revolutionary labor movements to provoke broad social change. Émile Durkheim
likewise examined the effects brought on by a growing division of labor that simultaneously led to
increasing individuality and the erosion of family and community bonds. Max Weber also explored the
social transformations taking place in European society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In
contrast to Marx, however, Weber argued that it was not only economic structures (e.g., capitalism),
but also organizational structures—most important, bureaucracies—that profoundly affected social
relations. Indeed, in one of the most famous metaphors in all of sociology, Weber compared modern
society to an “iron cage.” Weber also examined the systems of meaning or ideas, particularly those
associated with the growing rationalization of society, that both induced and resulted from such profound
structural change.

The Enlightenment ignited political reverberations as well. For instance, the English philosopher
Thomas Hobbes called into question the authority of kings whose rule was justified by divine right. In
his masterpiece of political philosophy, Leviathan (1651), he subscribed to a then-radical view that
championed the natural equality of all individuals and insisted that individuals’ rights, social coopera-
tion, and prosperity were best ensured through a strong central government that ruled through the con-
sent of the people. His compatriot, John Locke, the “father of liberalism,” advocated the overturning of
arbitrary, despotic monarchies, by revolution if necessary. Replacing them would be governments based
on rational, impersonal laws designed to protect free and equal citizens’ rights to “life, liberty and
estate.” Locke’s views on human nature, reason, equality, and rule by popular consent would inspire
many of the leading figures of the American Revolution.

Consequently, the eighteenth century ushered in tremendous political transformations throughout
Europe. One of the most significant political events of that time was the French Revolution, which
shook France between 1787 and 1799 and toppled the ancien régime, or old rule, that for centuries
had consolidated wealth, land, and power in the hands of the clergy and a nobility based on heredity.
Inscribed in large part by Rousseau’s Social Contract, the basic principle of the French Revolution, as
contained in its primary manifesto, La Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen (“The
Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen”), was that “all men are born and remain free and
equal in rights.” The French revolutionaries called for “liberty, fraternity, and equality.” Spurred by
the philosophies of the Enlightenment, they sought to substitute reason for tradition, and equal rights
for privilege. Political order could no longer be justified on the basis of a sacred, inviolable relation
between rulers and subjects. Because the revolutionaries sought to build a constitutional government
from the bottom up, the French Revolution stimulated profound political rethinking about the nature
of government and its proper relation to its citizens and set the stage for democratic uprisings through-
out Europe.

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

The Ins and Outs of the Classical Sociological Theory “Canon”

Thus far, we have argued that the central figures at the heart of classical sociological theory all sought to explain the extraordinary economic, political, and social transformations taking place in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Yet, concerns about the nature of social bonds and how these bonds can be maintained in the face of extant social change existed long before the eighteenth century in many places, and not only in Western Europe. Indeed, in the late fourteenth century, Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun (1332–1406), born in Tunis, North Africa, wrote extensively on subjects that have much in common with contemporary sociology (Martindale 1981:134–136; Ritzer and Goodman 2004:5). And long before the fourteenth century, Plato (circa 428–circa 347 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and Thucydides (circa 460–circa 400 BCE) wrote about the nature of war, the origins of the family and the state, and the relationship between religion and government—topics that have since become central to sociology (Seidman 1994:19). Aristotle, for example, emphasized that human beings were naturally political animals (zoon politikon; Martin 1999:157), and he sought to identify the “essence” that made a stone a stone or a society a society (Ashe 1999:89). For that matter, well before Aristotle’s time, Confucius (551–479 BCE) developed a theory for understanding Chinese society. Akin to Aristotle, Confucius maintained that government is the center of people’s lives and that all other considerations derive from it. According to Confucius, a good government must be concerned with three things: sufficient food, a sufficient army, and the confidence of the people (Jaspers 1957/1962:47).

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

Our key point here is that while the ideas of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are today at the heart of the classical sociological theoretical canon, they are not inherently better or more original than those of other intellectuals who wrote before or after them. Rather, it is to say that, for specific historical, social, and cultural as well as intellectual reasons, their works have helped define the discipline of sociology, and that sociologists refine, rework, and challenge their ideas to this day. 3

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

In Part II of this book, we focus on several classical writers who for social and/or cultural reasons were underappreciated as sociologists in their day. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), for example, was well known as a writer and radical feminist in her time but not as a sociologist (Degler 1966:vii). It was

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3Raewyn Connell (1997) noted that sociology was born during a decisive period of European colonial expansion. In turn, much of the discipline was devoted to collecting information about the colonizers’ encounters with “primitive Others.” Early sociologists’ views on progress, human evolution, and racial hierarchies, however, were largely marginalized as the process of canon formation began during the 1930s. This had the effect of purging the discourse of imperialism from the history of the discipline.
not until the 1960s that there was a formalized sociological area called “feminist theory.” Gilman sought to explain the basis of gender inequality in modern industrial society. She explored the fundamental questions that would become the heart of feminist social theory some 50 years later, when writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan popularized these same concerns.

Georg Simmel (1868–1963), a German sociologist, wrote works that would later become pivotal in sociology, though his career was consistently stymied both because of the unusual breadth and content of his work and because of his Jewish background. Simmel sought to uncover the basic forms of social interaction, such as “exchange,” “conflict,” and “domination,” that take place between individuals. Above all, Simmel underscored the contradictions of modern life; for instance, he emphasized how individuals strive to conform to social groups and, at the same time, to distinguish themselves from others. Simmel’s provocative work is gaining more and more relevance in today’s world where contradictions and ironies abound.

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

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

**Contemporary Sociological Theory**

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

Clearly, determining the “ins and outs” of contemporary theory is a controversial and subjective matter, and, as such, the writers whose work we feature in this volume are by no means unanimously “core.” As with the classical theorists discussed earlier, we address this issue within the space constraints of this book.

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4 Durkheim was also Jewish (indeed, he was the son of a rabbi). But anti-Semitism did not significantly impede Durkheim’s career. In fact, it was Durkheim’s eloquent article “Individualism and Intellectuals” (1898) on the Dreyfus affair (a political scandal that emerged after a Jewish staff officer named Captain Alfred Dreyfus was erroneously court-martialed for selling secrets to the German embassy in Paris) that shot him to prominence and eventually brought Durkheim his first academic appointment in Paris. In sum, German anti-Semitism was much more harmful to Simmel than French anti-Semitism was to Durkheim.
by providing a briefer look at a number of important theorists in the “Significant Others” section of the chapters that follow. That said, here we take a broad, historical perspective, prioritizing individuals whose work has significantly influenced others—and the discipline itself. That is, we look at individuals around whom specific theoretical “traditions” have been formed, from the mid-twentieth century until today.

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

Chapter 10 examines a broad body of work known as critical theory. We begin by focusing on the Frankfurt School, a contingent of German theorists writing from the 1920s through the 1960s who were deeply concerned about social and economic inequalities. Due in large measure to the dominance of the structural functionalist paradigm, however, the ideas expressed within this perspective would not find wide dissemination in the United States until the 1960s, when the sweeping social and cultural changes occurring in the broader society demanded a radically different theoretical approach for their explanation. Rather than emphasizing societal cohesion or consensus, as structural functionalists typically did, the Frankfurt School theorists (represented here by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse) underscored the divisive aspects of the social order, and the alienating conditions said to characterize modern societies. Though similarly concerned about extant social and economic inequalities, the contemporary critical theorists whose works you also read in this chapter—Jürgen Habermas and Patricia Hill Collins—reject the Frankfurt School’s bleak portrayal as to the nature of modern society, focusing instead on how individuals and social groups navigate even the most inequitable and oppressive circumstances. They place hope in the emancipation of humanity in the counterweight of social movements as well as the intellectual traditions of marginalized communities.

As you will see, one of the most important characteristics of both functionalism and critical theory is their collectivist or “macro” approach to social order. However, a variety of more individualistic perspectives focusing more on the “micro” dimension of the social order were developing alongside these two theoretical camps. In chapter 11 we examine two of the most important of these perspectives: exchange theory and rational choice theory. Instead of looking to social systems or institutions for explanations of social life, exchange theorists emphasize individual behavior. Moreover, they consider individuals to be strategic actors whose behavior is guided by exchanges of benefits and costs. Based on rational calculations, individuals use the resources they have at their disposal in an effort to optimize their rewards. We focus especially on the work of two renowned exchange theorists: George Homans, who draws principally from behavioral psychology and neoclassical economics, and Peter Blau, who, while sympathetic to economics, evinces a greater indebtedness to the German sociologist Georg Simmel (see chapter 6). In addition, we examine the work of James S. Coleman, who is one of the central figures within rational choice theory. While both exchange and rational choice theorists view the actors as purposive agents motivated by maximizing rewards, exchange theorists focus on the strategic decision making of individuals and how such decisions affect social relationships. For their part, rational choice theorists emphasize how group dynamics themselves shape individuals’ decisions.

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

In chapter 13, we discuss phenomenology and ethnomethodology, perspectives that, akin to exchange theory and symbolic interactionism, focus not on political, economic, and social institutions at the macro level, but on the everyday world of the individual. We begin the chapter by focusing on the work of Alfred Schutz and of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. You will see that, akin to symbolic interactionists, phenomenologists explore the subjective categories behind and within which everyday life revolves; that is, phenomenologists too are profoundly interested in meaning. However, much more so than symbolic interactionism, phenomenology is devoted to explaining how it is that even indirect and anonymous interactions are sustained by “intersubjectivity,” or shared meaning. We next turn to a discussion of ethnomethodology, particularly the work of Harold Garfinkel. As the central founder of this tradition, Garfinkel illuminates the actual methods people use to accomplish their everyday lives, rather than simply illuminating shared meaning. We conclude this chapter by examining the work of feminist Dorothy E. Smith, who incorporates elements of neo-Marxism into her phenomenological and ethnomethodological approach.

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

The three philosophers whose work you will read in chapter 15—Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Judith Butler—all take the questioning of “reality” even further, by emphasizing how all knowledge, including science, is a representation of reality and is not reality itself. We first focus on the work of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who contends that “reality” has completely given way to a simulation of reality, or hyperreality, because simulated experience has replaced the “real.” We then examine the work of another French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, who explores the limitations of knowledge, that is, the means by which knowledge collapses under multiple perspectives. We conclude this chapter by focusing on the work of prominent American philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler, who challenges the very binary categories that we use to think about both gender and sexual orientation. For Butler, gender identity as nothing more than unstable “fictions.”

We conclude this book with an examination of various theories pertaining to contemporary global society. As you will see, while the works of Immanuel Wallerstein, George Ritzer, and Anthony Giddens are quite distinct, these theorists all focus not on the dynamics of interpersonal interaction or the forces that give form to a single society per se, but rather on how social life is embedded in a global context, and how what happens in any given country or geographical zone is a function of its interconnections with other

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5Thus, for instance, by the time they are school age, many American children will have spent more hours watching television than the total number of hours they will have spent in classroom instruction (Lemert 1997:27).
geographical regions. With an increasingly unrestricted flow of economic capital and cultural images across countries, and the increasing porosity of national boundaries that this flow promotes, these theorists underscore how the “distant” and the “near” are not so far apart.

**WHY READ ORIGINAL WORKS?**

Sociological theory is not an easy subject matter to understand. The task is made that much more difficult by the fact that theorists oftentimes develop their own terminologies and implicitly “talk back” to a variety of thinkers whose ideas may or may not be explained to the reader. As a result, some professors agree with students that original works are just too hard to decipher. These professors use secondary textbooks that interpret and simplify the ideas of core theorists. Their argument is that you simply cannot capture students’ attention using original works; students must be engaged in order to understand, and secondary texts ultimately lead to a better grasp of the covered theories.

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

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

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

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

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

**HOW CAN WE NAVIGATE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?**

Thus far, we have (1) explained the imperativeness of sociological theory, (2) discussed the theorists who we consider to be at the heart of classical and contemporary sociological theory and, (3) argued that

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6Further complicating the matter is that many of the original works that make up the core of sociological theory were written in a language other than English. Language translation is itself an imperfect exercise.
students should read original theoretical works. Now we come to the fourth question: How can we best navigate the wide range of ideas that these theorists bring to the fore? To this end, in this section we explain the metatheoretical framework or “map” that we use in this book to explore and compare and contrast the work of each theorist.

The Questions of “Order” and “Action”

Our framework revolves around two central questions that social theorists and philosophers have grappled with since well before the establishment of sociology as an institutionalized discipline: the question of order and the question of action (Alexander 1987). Indeed, these two questions have been a cornerstone in social thought at least since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers. The first question (illustrated in Figure 1.3), is that of order. It asks, What accounts for the patterns or predictability of behavior that lead us to experience social life as routine? Or, expressed somewhat differently, How do we explain the fact that social life is not random, chaotic, or disconnected, but instead that it demonstrates the existence of an ordered social universe? The second question (illustrated in Figure 1.4) is that of action. It considers the factors that motivate individuals or groups to act. The question of action, then, turns our attention to the forces that are held to be responsible for steering individual or group behavior in a particular direction.

Similar to how the north–south, east–west coordinates allow you to orient yourself to the details on a street map, our analytical map is anchored by four “coordinates” that assist in navigating the details of the theories presented in this volume. In this case, the coordinates situate the answers to

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**Figure 1.3 Basic Theoretical Continuum as to the Nature of Social Order**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Collective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>patterns of social life seen as emerging from ongoing interaction</td>
<td>patterns of social life seen as the product of existing structural arrangements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 1.4 Basic Theoretical Continuum as to the Nature of Social Action**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonrational</th>
<th>Rational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>action motivated by ideals, values, morals, tradition, habits, or emotional states</td>
<td>action motivated by a strategic or calculated attempt to maximize rewards or benefits while minimizing costs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the two questions. Thus, to the question of order, one answer is that the patterns of social life are the product of structural arrangements or historical conditions that confront individuals or groups. As such, preexisting social arrangements produce the apparent orderliness of social life as individuals and groups are pursuing trajectories that, in a sense, are not of their own making. Society is thus pictured as an overarching system that works down on individuals and groups to determine the shape of the social order. Society is understood as a reality sui generis that operates according to its own logic distinct from the will of individuals. This orientation has assumed many different names: macro, holistic, objectivist, structuralist, and the label we use here: collective (or collectivist).

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

Turning to the question of action, we again find two answers, labeled here nonrational and rational. Specifically, action is primarily nonrational when it is guided by subjective ideals, symbolic codes, values, morals, norms, traditions, the quest for meaning, unconscious desires, emotional states, or a combination of these. While the nonrationalist orientation is relatively broad in capturing a number of motivating forces, the rationalist orientation is far less encompassing. It contends that individual and group actions are motivated primarily by the attempt to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. Here, individuals and groups are viewed as essentially calculating and strategic as they seek to achieve the “selfish” goal of improving their position. Guided by a rationalist orientation, actors are motivated more by interests than by values.

Intersecting the two questions and their answers, we can create a four-celled map on which we are able to plot the basic theoretical orientation of some of the core classical theorists (see Figure 1.5) and some of the major contemporary perspectives (see Figure 1.6) discussed in this book. The four cells are identified as individual-nonrational, individual-rational, collective-nonrational, and collective-rational. We cannot overemphasize that these four coordinates are “ideal types”; theorists and theories are never “pure.” Implicitly or explicitly, theorists inevitably incorporate more than one orientation in their work. This is even more true today than it was in the past, as today’s theorists explicitly attempt to bridge the theoretical gaps and dilemmas left by earlier thinkers. Thus, these coordinates, or cells in the table, are best understood as endpoints to continua on which theories typically occupy a position somewhere between the extremes. This multidimensionality and ambiguity is reflected in our maps by the lack of fixed points.

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

Consequently, not everyone views each theorist in exactly the same light. Moreover, even within one major work, a theorist may draw from both ends of the continua. Nevertheless, these maps enable you to (1) recognize the general tendencies that exist within each theorist’s body of work and (2) compare and contrast (and argue about) thinkers’ general theoretical orientations.

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1 The terms “rational” and “nonrational” are problematic in that they have a commonsensical usage that is at odds with how theorists use these terms. By “rational” we do not mean “good and smart,” and by “nonrational” we do not mean “irrational, nonsensical, or stupid” (Alexander 1987:11). Despite these problems, however, we continue to use the terms “rational” and “nonrational” because the semantic alternatives (subjectivist, idealist, internal, etc.) are problematic as well.
Put another way, when navigating the forest of theory, individual theorists are like trees. Our analytic map is a tool or device for locating the trees within the forest so that you can enter and leave having developed a better sense of direction, or, in this case, having learned far more than might otherwise have been the case. By enabling you to compare theorists’ positions on two crucial issues, you are less likely to see their work as a collection of separate, unrelated ideas. Bear in mind, however, that the map is only a tool. Its simplicity does not capture the complexities of the theories or of social life itself.

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

Consider this question: Why do people stop at red traffic lights? First, in terms of action, the answer to this question resides on a continuum with rational and nonrational orientations serving as the endpoints. On the one hand, you might say that people stop at red traffic lights because it is in their best interest to avoid getting a ticket or into an accident. This answer reflects a rationalist response. A nonrationalist answer to this question is that people stop at red traffic lights because they believe that it is good and right to follow the law. Here the individual takes her bearings from unquestioned morals or values. Interestingly, if this moral or normative imperative is the only motivation for action, the individual will stop at the traffic light even if there is no police car or oncoming cars in sight. External circumstances, such as whether or not she will get hit or caught if she goes through the red light, are irrelevant. On the other hand, if one’s only motivation for action is rationalist, and there are absolutely no visible dangers—that is, no other cars in sight and hence no possibility of getting a ticket or getting into an accident—the driver will not stop at the red light. Rather, on the basis of a calculated appraisal of the relevant conditions, she will pass through the intersection without stopping.

Another nonrationalist answer to the question “Why do people stop at red traffic lights?” involves “habits” (see Table 1.1). By definition, habits are relatively unconscious: we do not think about them. They come “automatically,” not from strategic calculations of interests or a concern for consequences; that is why they are typically considered nonrationalist. Interestingly, habits may or may not have their roots in morality. Some habits are “folkways” or routinized ways that people do things in a particular society, such as paying your bills by mail rather than in person or driving on the right side of the road, while other habits are attached to sacred values, such as putting your hand over your heart when you salute the flag. Getting back to our example, say you are driving your car on a deserted road at two o’clock in the morning, and you automatically stop at a red traffic light out of habit. Your friend riding with you might say, “Why are you stopping? There’s not a car in sight.” If your action were motivated

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

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

Do not copy, post, or distribute
simply from habit and not a moral imperative to follow the law, you might say, “Hey, you’re right!” and run through the red light.

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

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

Now let's turn to the issue of order.

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

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

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

As we noted earlier, sociological theorists often hold a variety of views on the action/order continua even within their own work. Overall, however, each theorist can be said to have a basic or general theoretical orientation. For instance, in terms of the classical theorists discussed previously, Marx was most interested in the collectivist and rationalist conditions behind and within order and action, while Durkheim, especially in his later work, was most interested in the collectivist and nonrationalist realms. Thus, juxtaposing Figure 1.5 with Table 1.1, you can see that if we were to resurrect Marx and Durkheim
from their graves and ask them the hypothetical question “Why do people stop at red traffic lights?”", it would be more likely that Marx would emphasize the rationalist motivation behind this act (they seek to avoid getting a ticket), while Durkheim would emphasize the nonrational motivation (they consider it the “right” thing to do)—although both would emphasize that these seemingly individualist acts are actually rooted in collectivist social and cultural structures—that it is the law with its coercive and moral force that undergirds individual behavior. Meanwhile, at the more individualist end of the continuum, Mead would probably emphasize the immediate ideational process in which individuals interpret the meanings for and consequences of each possible action.

Of course, the purpose of this book is not to examine the work of sociological theorists in order to figure out how they might answer a hypothetical question about traffic lights?”, it would be more likely that Marx would emphasize the rationalist motivation behind this act (they seek to avoid getting a ticket), while Durkheim would emphasize the nonrational motivation (they consider it the “right” thing to do)—although both would emphasize that these seemingly individualist acts are actually rooted in collectivist social and cultural structures—that it is the law with its coercive and moral force that undergirds individual behavior. Meanwhile, at the more individualist end of the continuum, Mead would probably emphasize the immediate ideational process in which individuals interpret the meanings for and consequences of each possible action.

Of course, the purpose of this book is not to examine the work of sociological theorists in order to figure out how they might answer a hypothetical question about traffic lights. Rather, the purpose of this book is to examine the central issues core classical and contemporary theorists themselves raise and analyze the particular theoretical stance they take as they explore these concerns. These tasks are particularly challenging because the contemporary theorists and perspectives you will encounter in this book tend to be even more theoretically complex than sociology’s classical founding figures. This is because contemporary theorists are not only drawing from and extending the classical theorists’ ideas but also seeking to improve on them. For instance, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens, whose works are discussed in chapters 10, 14, and 16, respectively, have each set out to develop a theoretical model that explicitly synthesizes and bridges nonrationalist and rationalist, and individualist and collectivist concerns and ideas. However, all of the contemporary theorists whose works you will read in this book are well aware of, and seek to correct in some way, the theoretical dilemmas posed by sociology’s founding
figures. Some thinkers, for instance those aligned with exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology (see chapters 11, 12, and 13), look to address more fully the individualist realm that Marx, Weber, and Durkheim underemphasized. Other theorists, such as the structural functionalist Talcott Parsons (see chapter 9) and critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (see chapter 10), meld the collectivist focus of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber with the ideas of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and thus incorporate an individualist (and nonrational) component to their respective arguments.

Notwithstanding their attempts to construct multidimensional theories, contemporary theorists and the perspectives with which they are aligned generally evince a “basic” theoretical orientation, many of which are illustrated in Figure 1.6. For instance, as you will see in chapter 13, phenomenology focuses, above all, on how individuals apprehend social life on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions. Instead of positing an overarching, objective social order that establishes behavioral codes according to which individuals are more or less compelled to act (reflecting a collectivist approach to order), they see behavior as patterned or predictable only to the extent that individuals rely on commonplace schemes of understanding to navigate their everyday life. This reflects an emphasis on the individualist/nonrationalist realm. Here, social life is pictured as an intricate panoply of interaction as individuals go about the

![Figure 1.6 Basic Orientation of Core Perspectives in Contemporary Sociological Theory](image)

**Figure 1.6 Basic Orientation of Core Perspectives in Contemporary Sociological Theory**

NOTE: This simplified diagram is intended to serve as a guide to comparing and contrasting the theoretical orientations underlying several contemporary theoretical perspectives and the work of authors who are aligned with those perspectives. For the sake of visual clarity, we include only the names of those theorists who arguably are most commonly associated with a given perspective, although, as the table of contents of this book suggests, any number of theorists are aligned with a given approach. However, all of the theorists and perspectives featured in this diagram (and this book) are far more nuanced and multidimensional than this simple figure suggests. The point is not to “fix” each perspective or theorist in a particular “box,” but to use the diagram to better understand complex ideas. Moreover, several perspectives discussed in this book—for instance, postmodernism and gender theory—are not included in this diagram. Postmodern theory deliberately challenges the very idea of fixed categories such as those that form the basis of this figure, while gender theories draw from, extend, and fuse a wide variety of perspectives and traditions.
process of making sense of the situations they face. As we discuss in chapter 11, exchange theory and rational choice theory, on the other hand, posit that individual conduct is not motivated by attempts to construct meaning or by an intersubjectivity that enables actors to coordinate their behavior. Instead, this perspective argues that individuals are motivated by conscious attempts to satisfy their interests, which reflects an individualist/rationalist theoretical orientation. Moreover, society itself is seen as an accumulation of individual efforts to maximize rewards that have the effect of producing and sustaining institutional structures. Thus, while an exchange theorist would recognize that individuals act within existing institutions, his focus would be how individuals maneuver within a given institution in order to maximize their self-interests.

Unlike the individualist perspectives just outlined, collectivist approaches argue that individual and group conduct is largely shaped by external forces. For instance, as you will see in chapter 9, structural functionalism posits that societies are self-contained systems that possess their own needs necessary to their survival. It is the existence of such societal needs that in large measure accounts for patterns of individual and group behavior. For example, because all societies must ensure some measure of peaceful coexistence between its members, a system of shared values and morals must be developed in order to establish the basis for consensual relations. As depicted in Figure 1.6, these assumptions reflect an emphasis on the collective/nonrational realm. For its part, world-systems theory, discussed in chapter 16, explores the historical dynamics that have created the modern capitalist economy, an economy whose reach spans the globe. Far from studying the routines of everyday interaction, or the consciousness of individuals, world-systems theory explores how distinct regions of the world are tied to one another by relations of domination and subordination that in turn affect economic and social dynamics within a given country. These regions have developed according to a strategic, profit-driven logic that has produced the world’s winners and losers, its colonizers and colonized. This argument reflects a collectivist/rationalist orientation.

Yet, it cannot be overemphasized that the point is not to “fix” each theorist or tradition in a particular box. All of the theorists and traditions presented in this book are far more complex than these simple figures let on. As indicated previously, many theorists featured in this book explicitly seek to develop a multidimensional framework, incorporating distinct traditions into multifaceted theoretical paradigms. In this volume, the explicitly synthetical theorists (Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Giddens), the dramaturgically inspired theorists (Erving Goffman and Arlie Hochschild) and those theorists who explicitly take up the issue of gender (Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins) clearly fall into this camp. Moreover, as you will see, postmodern thinkers (see chapter 15), such as Judith Butler and Jean Baudrillard, generally speaking, dismiss—rather than—advance overarching theoretical frameworks as “essentializing” and misguided. These theorists are probably best viewed not as exemplifying a specific quadrant in our metatheoretical model or even bridging quadrants but as rejecting the model altogether. Our goal throughout this book, then, is to explore the ideas of these provocative thinkers as they have set out to challenge and extend some of the discipline’s core tenets while helping us better understand the world in which we live. It is to this task that we now turn.
Discussion Questions

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

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

3. Numerous works of fiction speak to the social conditions that early sociologists were examining. For instance, Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) portrays the hardships of the Industrial Revolution, while Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862) addresses the political and social dynamics of the French Revolution. Read either of these works, or watch the movies or plays based on them, and discuss the tremendous social changes they highlight.

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

5. Consider the alleged conversation between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway:

  F. Scott Fitzgerald: “The rich are different than you and me.”

  Ernest Hemingway: “Yes, they have more money.”

  How does this brief exchange relate to the metatheoretical framework used in this book? Use concrete examples to explain.

6. Consider the following famous quote attributed to John Stuart Mill:

  “One person with a belief is equal to a force of 99 who have only interests.”

  How does this quote relate to the metatheoretical framework used in this book? Use concrete examples to explain. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Mill? How so?