A Sociology of Revolutions and Counterrevolutions

In December 2010, street demonstrations, labor strikes, and other acts of civil resistance swept through the small North African nation of Tunisia. The demonstrators met strong resistance from the Tunisian government. Nevertheless, their protests eventually resulted in the overthrow of autocratic President Ben Ali after 23 years in power.

The trigger for the Tunisian protests was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor who claimed he had been harassed and humiliated by authorities. Bouazizi died in a burn and trauma center 18 days after setting himself on fire. The Tunisian revolution was at the root of the “Arab Spring”—the wave of social unrest and social revolution that Tunisia’s uprising inspired throughout the Middle East. Such events are not only important in themselves; so too are the counterreactions to them by other individuals as well as by larger organizations. Those responses have since undermined the revolutions that occurred during the Arab Spring (Worth 2016). In some cases, such as in Egypt, counterreaction by the military led to a return to the kind of autocratic government that was a cause of the protests in the first place.
In the Persian Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain), monarchs have suppressed dissidents and thwarted efforts aimed at greater democratization (Fahim 2016). In the aftermath of the 2011 overthrow of dictator Muammar Qaddafi, Libya (and Yemen) have descended into civil wars, vicious fights for power, and, at least at the moment, large-scale anarchy.

In Libya, but, more important, in Syria and Iraq, a radical Islamic group—the Islamic State (IS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL], the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], or Da’ish, from an acronym for a name of the group in Arabic)—has swept through large portions of those countries and succeeded in dismembering them in its effort to form an independent state that spans much of the Middle East. That new state is envisioned to be a caliphate, dominated by a leader—a caliph—devoted to a strict interpretation of Islam. The success of IS led, in turn, to other counteractions, both locally (especially by the Kurds and Iranians) and globally (with the United States helping the Iraqi government and Russia aiding the Syrian government), designed to limit the IS’s gains, if not to defeat it. By mid-2017, IS had been pushed back on a variety of fronts, but it still controlled large parts of Syria, as well as a shrinking territory in Iraq, and it remained a force in Libya (and elsewhere).

By drawing on modern sociology’s 200-year history while looking to the future, sociologists today can find the tools and resources to gain a better understanding of where we have been, where we are, and, perhaps most important, where we are going. Sociology has traditionally tried to understand the place of the individual—even a Tunisian street vendor—within society and society’s effect on the individual. In today’s global age, however, we need to look beyond given individuals and societies to global realities and processes. For example, IS has grown in strength through the influx of individual supporters and fighters from other parts of the world, including the United States and Great Britain. To take a more general example of globalization—one that is more directly relevant to most readers of this book—online networks that transcend national boundaries, such as Facebook and Twitter, have forever altered the ways in which we interact with each other as well as the societies that we shape and that shape us. As the world has become increasingly globalization, sociology has developed an increasingly global perspective.

One of the most important lessons that you will learn in your study of sociology is that what you think and do as an individual is affected by what is happening in groups, organizations, cultures, societies, and the world. This is especially true of social changes, even those that are global in scope and seem at first glance to be remote from you, such as Mohamed Bouazizi’s public suicide and the revolution throughout much of the Middle East that it helped set in motion. The roots of that dramatic act of protest lay in poverty, high unemployment, an authoritarian government, and political corruption that affected Bouazizi personally. Before his actions, most Tunisians would never have risked their lives to protest against their country’s repressive regime. Yet he and tens of thousands of others in countries across the region did just that. While you may or may not be motivated to engage in revolutionary activities, you are continually affected by the social changes taking place around you.

A second important lesson in sociology is that you are not only affected by larger events, but also capable to some degree of having an impact on large-scale structures and processes. This is an example of the butterfly effect (Lorenz 1995). While this concept is generally applied to physical phenomena, it also applies to social phenomena (Daipha 2012). The idea is that a relatively small change in a specific location can have far-ranging, even global, effects over both time and distance. For example, Bouazizi’s actions helped lead to the Tunisian revolution and, more generally, to street demonstrations and civil war, as well as counterreactions...
elsewhere in the Arab world that continue to reverberate throughout the region and many other parts of the world. Perhaps the arc of your life and career will be affected by the upheavals that began with the Arab Spring. More important, it is very possible that actions you take in your lifetime will have wide-ranging, perhaps global, effects.

These examples of the relationships between people and larger social realities and changes set the stage for the definition of *sociology* as the systematic study of the ways in which people are affected by and affect the social structures and social processes associated with the groups, organizations, cultures, societies, and world in which they exist.

**THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE SOCIAL WORLD—AND SOCIOLOGY**

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

By the middle of the twentieth century, manufacturing in the United States was in the early stages of a long decline that continues to this day. (However, manufacturing in other parts of the world, most notably China, is booming.) The United States had moved from the industrial age to the “postindustrial age” (Bell 1973; Leicht and Fitzgerald 2006). In the United States, as well as in the Western world more generally, the center of the economy and the attention of many sociologists shifted from the factory to the office. That is, the focus moved from blue-collar manual work to white-collar office work (Mills 1951) as well as to the bureaucracies in which many people worked (Clegg and Lounsbury 2009; Weber [1921] 1968). Another change in the postindustrial age was the growth of the service sector of the economy, involving everyone from high-status service providers such as physicians and lawyers to lower-status workers behind the counters of fast-food restaurants and now those who drive for Uber.

The more recent rise of the “information age” (Castells 2010; David and Millwood 2012) can be seen as a part, or an extension, of the postindustrial age. Knowledge and information are critical in today’s world. So, too, are the technologies—computers, smartphones, the world wide web—that have greatly increased the productivity of individual workers and altered the nature of their work. Rather than designers drawing designs by hand, computer-assisted technologies are now used to create designs for everything from electric power grids to patterned fabrics. The widespread use of smartphones has enabled,
among many other things, the rise of companies such as Uber and Lyft, whose success is threatening the rental car industry and especially the taxicab industry and the livelihoods of many taxi drivers (who are also threatened by driverless cars). A passenger uses an app to indicate that he or she needs a ride, and one is provided by an independent car owner for a set fee, which is automatically charged to the passenger’s credit card (no tipping is allowed). Some of the drivers work a few hours per day for these services in search of a little extra money, while others work full-time for the services. Their willingness to do this work has had the result of reducing the need for taxis and full-time taxi drivers.

However, it is not just work that has been affected by new technologies; virtually everyone and everything is being affected by them. Uber is part of the growing “sharing economy” (Sundarajan 2016), in which people share (for a fee) many things; most notably, some share their homes through websites such as Airbnb.com (Pogue 2014). One key component of this new technological world, Google (see the previous mention of Google’s driverless car project, Waymo), is so powerful that a 2011 book is entitled The Googlization of Everything (Vaidhyanathan 2011). Thus, much sociological attention has shifted to computers and the internet, as well as those who work with them (Lynch 2016; Scholz 2013).

The transition from the industrial to the postindustrial and now to the information age has important personal implications. Had you been a man who lived in the industrial age, you would have worked (if you could find a job) for money (pay). You would have done so to be able to buy what you needed and wanted. Women working in the private sphere were largely uncompensated or compensated at a lower rate, as is often still the case. However, in the postindustrial age, it is increasingly likely that men and women will be willing, or forced, to work for free (Anderson 2009; Ritzer 2015b; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Terranova 2013), as in the case of interns, bloggers, and contributors to YouTube and Wikipedia.

Many hope that the labor they currently perform for free will eventually have an economic payoff. One person (known as PewDiePie) played video games on YouTube, garnered about 24 million subscribers, and reputedly earned millions of dollars per year (Jacobs 2014). Playing video games has become big business—one tournament drew 11,000 fans to a stadium and offered $11 million in prize money. Many hope that their work as bloggers or on YouTube will lead to full-time jobs.

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

CENTRAL CONCERNS FOR A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SOCIOLOGY

While the social world has been changing dramatically over the last two centuries or so and sociology has adapted to those changes, sociology has continued to focus on many of its traditional concerns. We have already mentioned industry, production, and work as long-term sociological interests; others include deviance and crime (see Chapter 6), the family (see Chapter 10), and the city (see Chapter 14). Of particular concern to many sociologists has been, and continues to be, the issue of inequality as it affects the poor, particular racial and ethnic groups, women, and LGBTQ individuals (see Chapters 8 and 9). The bulk of this book will be devoted to these basic sociological topics and concerns, but the discussion will also encompass the nontraditional and very contemporary issues of consumption, the digital world, and especially globalization.

GLOBALIZATION

No social change is as important today as globalization, because it is continually affecting all aspects of the social world everywhere on the globe. A date marking the beginning of globalization cannot be given with any precision, and in fact is in great dispute (Ritzer 2012b; Ritzer and Dean 2015). However, the concept of globalization first began to appear in the popular and academic literature around 1990. Today, globalization is a central issue in the social world as a whole as well as in sociology; globalization and talk about it are all around
Blogging and Tweeting about Sociology

Blogging and tweeting are two popular ways to transmit and acquire information today. Current events are often posted in real time, sometimes by individuals who are witnessing them. For example, the Arab Spring was referred to as the Twitter Revolution because people around the world were able to follow these political uprisings through tweets posted by protestors. Sports fans can follow their favorite teams and on game day receive instantaneous alerts when their team scores a touchdown or scores a run. Individuals who want to find alternative perspectives on social issues from the mainstream press can follow a variety of alternate online sites (e.g., the far right-wing Breitbart News) and blogs (e.g., the left-leaning Mother Jones). Blogging and tweeting encourage individual agency. They offer the opportunity for all of us to participate in the social construction of reality and can be used as platforms to promote social reforms, such as #BlackLivesMatter. But there are a few structural constraints attached to these methods of communication. Twitter limits tweets to only 140 characters. Many popular blogs and Twitter accounts are written and maintained by celebrities, professional experts, and representatives of formal organizations (some of which are highly politicized), who have more power to shape reality than the average person does. Indeed, President Trump has made tweeting a commonplace communication method for the highest government office in the country.

Sociologists and organizations devoted to sociological theory and research use blogs and tweets to expose others to the sociological imagination, helping individuals at the micro level realize that their private troubles are connected to larger public issues. Popular sociologists who blog include George Ritzer (https://georgeritzer.word press.com), who discusses themes addressed in this book, such as McDonaldization, globalization, and consumption, and Philip Cohen, who writes about family inequality (https://familyinequality.wordpress.com). The Society Pages blog ring (http://thesocietypages .org) provides a set of sociology blogs such as The Color Line (https://thesocietypages.org/col online) and Sociology Lens (https:// thesocietypages.org/sociologylens) that keep readers current on issues pertaining to inequality, race, gender, crime, and health. The American Sociology Association’s blog (http://speak4sociology.org) offers a forum for its followers to debate sociological issues. A variety of Twitter accounts regularly post comments about and links to relevant sociological topics, including @Soc_Imagination, @SociologyLens, @DiscoverSoc, @SocWomen, and @SocImages. In addition, professional sociologists such as Michael Burawoy (@bura way), Matthew Desmond (@just_shelter), Zeynep Tufekci (@zeynep), and Sudhir Venkatesh (@avsudhir) tweet to promote awareness about social problems and publicize their research and social activism.

Engaging the Digital World

Select one of the sociology blogs or Twitter accounts listed previously. Check this digital source periodically throughout the semester, keeping track of issues that you find most interesting or problematic. You can create your own blog to do this, or if you have a Twitter account, you can tweet about them. At the end of the semester, write a summary of what you have learned, which you can include on your blog or as a link posted to your Twitter account.
Society is a complex pattern of social relationships that is bounded in space and persists over time. The society has traditionally been the largest unit of analysis in sociology. However, in the global age, societies are seen as of declining importance (Holton 2011; Meyer, Bolh, and Ramirez 1997). This is the case, in part, because larger transnational and global social structures are growing in importance. These include the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), multinational corporations (MNCs) such as Google and ExxonMobil, and multinational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International. In at least some cases, these transnational structures are becoming more important than individual societies. OPEC, for example, is more important to the rest of the world’s well-being than are the organization’s key member societies, such as Abu Dhabi or even Saudi Arabia.

Social processes, like social structures, exist not only at the societal level but also at the global level, and these global processes are increasing in importance. Consider migration (see Chapter 14). People move about, or migrate, within and between societies. For example, many people have moved from the northeastern United States to the West and the South. However, in the global age, people are increasingly moving between societies, some halfway around the world. The United States now has a higher percentage of immigrants than it has had in almost a century (see Figure 1.1). Many have migrated from and through Mexico to the United States (Massey 2003; Ortmeyer and Quinn 2012). More generally, large numbers of people are migrating from a number of predominantly Islamic societies in the Middle East and Africa to the West (Caldwell 2009; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). In many cases, they are fleeing from war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya (Yeates 2015). In addition, the movement of thousands of people from the West to join radical Islamist organizations (such as the Islamic State), especially in Syria and Iraq, has been of major concern to Western governments. Some fear that at least some of those involved in radical Islamist activities there will migrate back to the West and engage in terrorist acts.

There have always been large-scale population movements. However, in the global age, and even with recent restrictions, people generally move around the world far more freely and travel much greater distances than ever before. Another way of saying this is that people—and much else—are more “fluid.” That is, they move farther, more easily, and more quickly than ever before. Younger people, especially millennials (or Generation Y, those born from the early 1980s through the late 1990s), are likely to be especially mobile, including globally. Their greater fluidity is reflected in, among many other things, the fact that they are more likely to book airline tickets and to check in online, and to use boarding passes sent directly to their smartphones (Lee 2013).

The movement of products of all types is also more fluid as a result of the existence of massive container ships, jet cargo planes, and package delivery services such as FedEx and UPS. Even more fluid is the digital “stuff” you buy on the internet when you download music, videos, movies, and so on. And in the realm of the family, tasks once confined to the home, such as caregiving and housework, have become increasingly fluid, as those who can afford to do so often outsource domestic labor (van der Lippe, Frey, and Tsvetkova 2012; Yeates 2009). More generally, that greater fluidity is manifested in the information that flows throughout the world in the blink of an eye as a result of the internet, texting, e-mail, and social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter.
ASK YOURSELF
Have you ever thought of your posts on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter as part of a global flow of information? In what ways do they actually fit this description? What does your position in this global flow of information reveal about you?

These flows can be expedited by structures of various types. For instance, air cargo delivery will increasingly be facilitated by the development of the “aerotropolis” (Kasarda and Lindsay 2011), a pre-planned “city of the future” that is developed because of proximity and access to a large, modern airport (Kasarda 2016). For example, New Songdo, South Korea, is being built (it is more than 50 percent completed) because such an airport (Incheon) is nearby and easily reached via a 12-mile-long bridge. The European Union, founded in 1993, is an example of a social structure that serves to ease the flow of citizens among member nations (but not of people living outside the EU). Although they have been increasing in recent years because of the flow of undocumented immigrants, border restrictions were reduced or eliminated completely among the 27 EU member nations.

Similarly, the creation in 1975 of the euro greatly simplified economic transactions among the 18 EU countries that accept it as their currency.

There are also structures that impede various kinds of global flows. National borders, passports and passport controls (Robertson 2010; Torpey 2000, 2012), security checks, and customs controls limit the movement of people throughout the world. Such restrictions were greatly increased in many parts of the world after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001. This made global travel and border crossing more difficult and time-consuming. Then there are the even more obvious structures designed to limit the movement of people across borders. Examples include the fences between Israel and the West Bank, as well as one between Israel and Egypt, which was completed in 2013. Even more recent are border fences under construction or completed in several European countries (e.g., Hungary, Slovenia), which are designed to limit, direct, or stop the flow of migrants from Syria and elsewhere (Surk 2015). Donald Trump promised to turn the fence between the United States and Mexico into a wall, at least for part of the length of the distance required. In the early days of his presidency, Trump encountered
opposition to the expanded wall because of its high cost and environmental concerns. It remains to be seen how much of the extended wall will actually be built. The existing fences across the Mexican border, and increased border police and patrols, have led unauthorized migrants to take longer and riskier routes into the United States. There are more than 200 immigration detention centers in the United States (see Figure 1.2), and Human Rights Watch found that 18 immigrants died in them between 2012 and 2015 due to negligent medical care (Jula and Preston 2016). There are, of course, many other structural barriers in the world, most notably trade barriers and tariffs, which limit the free movement of goods and services of many kinds.

In sum, globalization is defined by increasingly fluid global flows and the structures that expedite and impede those flows. Globalization is certainly increasing, and it brings with it a variety of both positive and negative developments (Ritzer and Dean 2015). On one side, most people throughout the world now have far greater access to goods, services, and information from around the globe than did people during the industrial age. On the other side, a variety of highly undesirable things also flow more easily around the world, including diseases such as Zika, HIV/AIDS, and Ebola and pollution released by industrialized countries that worsens the adverse effects of climate change (including global warming). Also on the negative side are the flows of such forms of “deviant globalization” as terrorism, sex trafficking, and the black markets for human organs and drugs (Gilman, Goldhammer, and Weber 2011).

CONSUMPTION
While consumption has been a central feature of societies for centuries, it is only in recent years that we can think in terms of a “world of consumers” (Trentmann 2016). Beginning in the 1950s, the center of many capitalist economies began to shift from production and work to consumption, or the process by which people obtain and utilize goods and services. During that period, the center of the U.S. economy shifted from the factory and the office to the shopping mall (Baudrillard [1970] 1998; Lipovetsky 2003). For many, work and production became less important than consumption.

**FIGURE 1.2 • U.S. Immigration Detention Facilities**

![Map of U.S. Immigration Detention Facilities](https://www.ice.gov/detention-facilities)

The dramatic rise in consumption was made possible by, among other things, the growing affluence of the population. A more specific factor was the introduction (in the 1950s and 1960s) and increasing availability of credit cards. The use of credit cards has now become widespread at shopping malls, on the internet, and in many other settings. One indicator of the increase in consumption in the United States is the increase in credit card debt. As you can see in Figure 1.3, credit card debt per household grew astronomically in the early years of credit card use (the figure begins with $37 in 1969). Credit card debt reached its high point, $8,729, in 2008 and has been steadily declining since the Great Recession to an average of $5,946 per household. However, households that are classified as indebted, or that carry a balance, have an average credit card debt of $16,060.

**ASK YOURSELF**

Have your consumption habits or credit card use changed over the last six months? The last three years? Do you anticipate that your habits will change in the next three years? If so, how and why? Will you consume more or less?

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

Consumption and globalization are also deeply intertwined. Much of what we consume in the developed world comes from other countries. In 2015 alone, the United States imported more than $480 billion worth of goods from China; the comparable figure in 1985 was only $4 million in goods (https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html; U.S. Census Bureau 2013). Furthermore, the speed and convenience of internet commerce tend to make

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**FIGURE 1.3 • U.S. Credit Card Debt, 1969–2015**

![Graph showing U.S. Credit Card Debt, 1969–2015](source-url)
global realities and distances irrelevant to consumers. Finally, travel to other parts of the world—a form of consumption itself—is increasingly affordable and common. A major objective of tourists is often the sampling of the foods of foreign lands, as well as the purchase of souvenirs (Chambers 2010; Gmelch 2010; Mak, Lumbers, and Eves 2012).

Sociologists are understandably interested in these developments in the realm of consumption. Early sociologists completed many studies of work, production, factories, and factory workers. Today's sociologists continue to study work-related issues, but they are devoting increasing attention to consumption in general (Sassatelli 2007) and more specifically to such phenomena as online shopping, done increasingly through the use of smartphones (Horrigan 2008; Morris 2013), the behavior of shoppers in more material locales such as department stores (Miller 1998; Zukin 2004), and the development of more recent consumption sites, such as fast-food restaurants (Ritzer, forthcoming) and shopping malls (Ritzer 2010b).

**McDonaldization**

Ritzer's study of fast-food restaurants led to the development of the concept of McDonaldization, or the process by which the rational principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of society and more societies throughout the world (Ritzer, forthcoming; for a number of critical essays on this perspective, see Ritzer 2010c, 275–357). This process leads to the creation of rational systems—like fast-food restaurants—that have four defining characteristics:

- **Efficiency.** The emphasis is on the use of the quickest and least costly means to whatever end is desired. Perhaps the best example of efficiency is the drive-through window, a highly organized means for employees to dole out meals in a matter of seconds.
- **Calculability.** You hear a lot at McDonald's about quantities: How large the food portions are—the Big Mac—and how low the prices are—the dollar breakfast. You don't hear as much, however, about the quality of the restaurant's ingredients or its products.
- **Predictability.** McDonaldization ensures that the entire experience of patronizing a fast-food chain is nearly identical from one geographic setting to another—even globally—and from one time to another. For example, when customers enter a McDonald's restaurant, employees ask what they wish to order, following scripts created by the corporation.
- **Control.** In McDonaldized systems, technology exerts a good deal of control over people, processes, and products. French fry machines buzz when the fries are done and even automatically lift them out of the hot oil when they've reached just the right amount of crispiness. Workers must load fry baskets with uncooked fries and unload them when the baskets emerge from the oil.

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

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

Sociologists are also interested in how consumers use shopping malls and e-tailers in ways that were not anticipated by their designers. For example, people often wander through shopping malls and their many shops, which have been designed to spur consumption, without buying anything. Travelers are using internet sites such as Expedia and KAYAK to compare prices but then buying airplane tickets on the airlines’ own websites.

Social change continues. The Great Recession and its ongoing aftermath have altered many things, including the degree to which society is dominated by consumption. Even today, long after the onset of the recession in 2007 and its supposed end, many U.S. consumers remain reluctant to spend money, or at least as much as they did in the past, on consumption (Kurtz 2014). As a result, consumption sites have experienced great difficulties. Many outdoor strip malls and some indoor malls have emptied; they have become “dead malls” (as documented on the site http://deadmalls.com). Las Vegas, which has long been a capital for the consumption of entertainment and high-end goods and services, has been hurting (Nagourney 2013). It seems possible, although highly unlikely, that even though we entered the consumption age only about half a century ago, we now may be on the verge of what could be called the “postconsumption age.” While excessive consumption and the related high level of debt were key factors in causing the Great Recession, a postconsumption age would bring with it problems of its own, such as fewer jobs and a declining standard of living for many.

**ASK YOURSELF**
What would your life be like in a postconsumption age? In what ways might it be better? Worse? Why?

**THE DIGITAL WORLD**
Sociology has always concerned itself with the social aspects and implications of technology, or the interplay of machines, tools, skills, and procedures for the accomplishment of tasks. One example is the assembly line, a defining feature of early twentieth-century factories. Later, sociologists became interested in the automated technologies that came to define factories. However, technologies have continued to evolve considerably since then. Sociologists are now devoting an increasing amount of attention to the digital world that has emerged as a result of new technologies already mentioned in this chapter, such as computers, smartphones, the internet, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Clough 2013).

The networking sites on the internet that involve social interaction are the most obviously sociological in character (Aleman and Wartman 2008; Patchin and Hinduja 2010). For example, Hodkinson (2015) has recently pointed out the similarities between teenagers’ bedrooms and their social networking sites in terms of privacy issues. Both are intimate personal spaces where teenagers socialize and individualize in ways that express their identities. Social networking sites are especially important in North America, where the percentage of those with access...
Currently in its eighth edition, *The McDonaldization of Society* continues to be relevant in its analysis of not just American society, but also the global domain. The four defining characteristics of McDonaldization—efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control—have been exported to and adopted by other countries in addition to McDonald’s restaurants themselves. Like globalization, McDonaldization is a process that involves multidirectional “global flows of people, objects, places, and information” (Ritzer and Dean 2015:187). Indeed, Ritzer argues that McDonaldization is a type of globalization, what he calls the “globalization of nothing” (2015a:185). McDonaldization is a type of “nothing” because it and its offerings are centrally conceived, controlled, and lacking in distinctive content. In contrast, “something” (say, a home-cooked meal) is locally conceived, controlled, and rich in distinctive content. In contrast, “something” (say, a home-cooked meal) is locally conceived, controlled, and rich in distinctive content. In contrast, “something” (say, a home-cooked meal) is locally conceived, controlled, and rich in distinctive content. In contrast, “something” (say, a home-cooked meal) is locally conceived, controlled, and rich in distinctive content.

However, no social form or process is completely devoid of something—even one that is McDonaldized. While chain fast-food restaurants are less distinctive than indigenous restaurants, some do adapt their food options and practices to local cultures. This is an example of *glocalization*, or the “interpenetration of the global and the local,” which results “in unique outcomes in different geographic areas” (Ritzer 2015a:190). For example, McDonald’s offers the McAloo Tikki burger in India, which is made with a potato patty instead of beef to accommodate Hindus who do not eat beef. Offering different food options to satisfy the cultural and religious preferences of consumers in different counties is a weak form of glocalization because it does not necessarily challenge McDonaldization—the McAloo Tikki burger in India is just as efficiently mass-produced, calculable, and predictable as the Big Mac in the United States is. Efforts of DeMcDonaldization face a similar dilemma. Starbucks might appear to be the antithesis of McDonald’s, with its supposedly caring corporate image and its inviting cafes that encourage customers to linger for hours. However, the vast majority of Starbucks’ customers do not even enter the stores; they use the drive-through windows. Like McDonald’s, Starbucks cafes and products are standardized and predictable, and workers are controlled by technologies, such as automated espresso machines (2015a:198–199).

**Supplementary Resources**

- Examine photographs and learn more about what *Smithsonian* magazine has identified as the most unique McDonald’s restaurants in the world at www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/most-unique-mcdonalds-around-world-180955090. You can also look at menu items from different McDonald’s restaurants on BuzzFeed, at https://www.buzzfeed.com/gavon/45-mcdonalds-items-not-available-in-the-us-that?utm_term=ljpkeMdk9W#tbpjtb3jlv.
to the internet is highest (see Figure 1.4). However, their importance is increasing elsewhere, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, as reflected in the role they played there in recent social revolutions. Protesters used cell phones and the internet to inform each other, and the world, about the evolving scene. To take another example, Facebook.com/yalaYL has become a key site where Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arabs communicate with each other about both everyday concerns and big issues such as the prospect for peace in the Middle East. This social networking takes place online, while peaceful face-to-face interaction between such people, and between their leaders, is difficult or nonexistent, especially in light of the 2014 war in and around Gaza, as well as the continuing violence there and elsewhere in and around Israel (Bronner 2011).

While social networking sites can bring about greater interaction, they also come between people and affect the nature of interaction. For example, Twitter limits each message to 140 characters, but face-to-face communication has no such limits. On the other hand, face-to-face communication is limited to a shared physical space, whereas communication via Twitter travels anywhere there is a device connected to the internet. Sociologists are interested in getting a better handle on the nature of the differences, as well as the similarities, between mediated and nonmediated interaction. In technologically mediated interaction, technology such as the internet and the smartphone comes between the people who are communicating, while there is no such interference in nonmediated interaction. People who are shy and insecure when it comes to dating or sex, for example, may be much more comfortable relating to others on mediated websites such as Match.com or OkCupid.

Another sociological issue related to the internet is the impact on our lives of spending so much time interacting on social networking sites. For example, are you more likely to write term papers for your college classes using shorter sentences and more abbreviations because of your experience on Twitter or with texting? Consider also the impact of the nine hours per day that young people between the ages of 13 and 18 spend on entertainment or screen media (Common Sense Media 2015). In some cases, little time remains for other activities (schoolwork, face-to-face interaction). Increasing the ability of children to spend time on screen media is the growing availability of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. In 2013, about 75 percent of children in the United States under eight years of age lived in homes with mobile devices, compared to 52 percent just two years earlier. They were also more than twice as likely to use such devices in 2013 than they were in 2011 (Common Sense Media 2013).

Internet technology also affects the nature of consumption. More of it is taking place on such sites as eBay and Amazon.com, and that trend is expected to continue to grow. In 2010, a Pew study found that, during an average day, 21 percent of

FIGURE 1.4 • Internet Access by Geographic Region, 2016

As a college student, you live a truly global existence in a college or university. A significant number of your classmates may come from elsewhere in the world. Your classes are increasingly being taught by teaching assistants and professors from other parts of the globe. The ideas you are learning are the most global of all, flowing freely from virtually everywhere in the world to become part of lectures and textbooks.

As consumers, you and your classmates are likely well acquainted with Amazon.com and the nearby shopping mall. In addition, on the internet you are able to find an infinite variety of goods (including this textbook) and services, the majority of which are likely to come from the far reaches of the world.

Finally, an increasing portion of your education is obtained through the inherently global internet—for example, through e-learning on web-based courses and online degree programs. In 2013 the number of students taking at least one online course nearly doubled, to 45 percent, from 23 percent five years before (Bolkan 2013). With the emergence of massive open online courses (MOOCs), you, and perhaps hundreds of thousands of students from around the globe, are increasingly likely to participate in global classes (including courses in sociology; Behbehian and Burawoy 2014) and other programs available on the internet (see Chapter 11 for more on MOOCs; see also Heller 2013; Lewin 2012).

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

Internet users in the United States look for information about a service or product they are thinking about buying (Jansen 2010). It is also easier for people to spend money on consumption on internet sites than it is in the material world. It is worth noting that these sites, as well as the internet in general, are global in their scope. The ease with which global interactions and transactions occur on the internet is a powerful indicator of, and spur to, the process of globalization.

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

**GLOBALIZATION, CONSUMPTION, THE DIGITAL WORLD, AND YOU**

The three main issues discussed previously, taken singly and collectively, are of great concern not only to society in general and to sociologists but also to you as a college student. You live a good part of your life in these three interrelated domains.

As a college student, you live a truly global existence in a college or university. A significant number of your classmates may come from elsewhere in the world. Your classes are increasingly being taught by teaching assistants and professors from other parts of the globe. The ideas you are learning are the most global of all, flowing freely from virtually everywhere in the world to become part of lectures and textbooks.

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Globalization, consumption, and the internet are of great importance on their own. However, perhaps more important are the ways in which they interact with one another and interpenetrate with your life as a college student—and the lives of virtually everyone else.

**SOCIOLOGY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

This chapter has emphasized recent social changes and their impact on society and on sociology, but there is also much continuity in society, as well as
in the field of sociology. This section deals with a number of traditional approaches and concerns in sociology that are of continuing relevance to even the most recent sociological issues.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The systematic study of the social world has always required imagination on the part of sociologists. There are various ways to look at the social world. For example, instead of looking at the world from the point of view of an insider, one can, at least psychologically, place oneself outside that world. The U.S. “War on Terror” might look defensible from the perspective of an American, especially one who lived through 9/11, but it would look quite different if you imagined yourself in the place of an innocent Muslim caught in the middle of that war (Philips 2016).

The phenomenon of being able to look at the social world from different, imaginative perspectives attracted the attention of the famous sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), who in 1959 wrote a very important book titled *The Sociological Imagination*. He argued that sociologists have a unique perspective—the **sociological imagination**—that gives them a distinctive way of looking at data or reflecting on the world around them (Scott and Nilsen 2013). The sociological imagination challenges us to situate our personal biographies in a historical context. For example, the fact that many of us no longer use cash is not simply an individual preference, but the consequence of technological changes. Cash is not a viable option for online shopping. Most retailers make it easy and convenient to use credit cards instead of cash at drive-through windows and gasoline stations. Recently, Amazon opened physical grocery stores that require consumers to use a mobile app on their smartphones to purchase items. Consumers scan their smartphones when they enter the store, and digital technology detects what they place in their carts. There is no need to stand in line to pay for any items because they are charged to a customer’s Amazon account when the person leaves the store (Rao 2016).

**Private Troubles and Public Issues**

The sociological imagination may be most useful in helping sociologists see the linkage between private troubles and public issues. For example, ADHD—attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder—can easily be seen as a private trouble. For years there was little public awareness of ADHD, and those who had it were likely to suffer alone. But since the 1980s, it has become clear that ADHD is also a public issue, and it is becoming an increasingly important one not only in the United States but also globally (Ellison 2015). The number of children in the United States ages 3 to 17 diagnosed with ADHD increased from 6 percent in 1997 to 1999 to 9 percent in 2014 (Bloom, Jones, and Freeman 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014; Goodwin 2011). It is clear that many people suffer from ADHD, which creates a number of larger problems for schools, employers, and society as a whole. The fact that it has become a public issue may make ADHD less of a private trouble for some, as there is now greater public understanding of the problem, and many more support groups are available.

In another example, a 2011 White House report details the fact that women are more likely than men to be concentrated in lower-paying jobs (see Figure 1.5; U.S. Department of Commerce 2011). For example, women are much more likely
to be comparatively poorly paid dental hygienists than dentists, or legal assistants rather than lawyers. Being limited occupationally creates personal troubles for many women, such as inadequate income and job dissatisfaction. This is also a public issue, not only because the discrepancy between the sexes is unfair to women as a whole but also because society is not benefiting from the many contributions women could be making.

The decision to pursue one college major or career path over another could become a private trouble if a student makes a poor choice or has one forced upon him or her. Sociologists have also shown that such choices are very much related to larger public issues. If many people make poor choices, or are forced into them—as women and other minorities often are—this will lead to public issues such as wide-scale job dissatisfaction and poor performance on the job. Culturally based ideas about gender often shape personal preferences in choosing a college major (Charles and Bradley 2009), and gendered beliefs about career competence steer women and men toward different types of jobs and away from others (Correll 2001, 2004; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Being in a poorly paid and unsatisfying job is a personal trouble for an individual woman, but it is a public issue when large numbers of women find themselves in this situation.

**ASK YOURSELF**

Do you agree that private choices sometimes lead to, or are part of, public issues? Can you think of an example from your own life or the life of a family member?

**The Micro–Macro Relationship**

The interest in personal troubles and public issues is a specific example of a larger and more basic sociological concern with the relationship between microscopic (micro, or small-scale) social phenomena, such as individuals and their thoughts and actions, and macroscopic (macro, or large-scale) social phenomena, such as groups, organizations, cultures, society, and the world, as well as the relationships among them (Turner 2005). For example, Karl Marx, often considered one of the earliest and most important sociologists, was interested in the relationship between what workers do and think (micro issues) and the capitalist economic system in which the workers exist (a macro issue). To take

**FIGURE 1.5 • Percentages of Women in Selected Occupations, 2014**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percentage of Women Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registered Nurse</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental Hygienist</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School Teacher</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Professor</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Assistant</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.5** Percentages of Women in Selected Occupations, 2014

a more contemporary example, Randall Collins (2009) has sought to develop a theory of violence that deals with everything from individuals skilled in violent interactions, such as attacking those who are weak, to the material resources needed by violent organizations to cause the destruction of other violent organizations. An example of the former type of violent organization is the well-equipped U.S. Navy SEALs team that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011 and through that act helped hasten the decline of al-Qaeda. However, the decline of al-Qaeda helped lead to the rise of a new, even more violent, organization, the Islamic State.

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

The Agency–Structure Relationship
American sociologists tend to think in terms of the micro–macro relationship. In other parts of the world, especially in Europe, sociologists are more oriented to the agency–structure relationship. The agency–structure continuum is complex, but for our purposes we can think of agency as resembling the micro level and structure as resembling the macro level.

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

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

Agents (you as a student, in this case) have great power. In the words of another important sociologist, Erving Goffman (1961b, 81), individuals are dangerous giants. That is, they have the potential to disrupt and destroy the structures in which they find themselves. Yet agents often do not realize the power they possess. As a result, social structures such as the university and the class you are currently taking function for long periods of time with little or no disruption by individual agents.

However, there are times, such as during the anti-Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when students come to realize that they are dangerous giants and act to change not only the university but also the larger society (Gitlin 1993). For example, students at some universities are protesting against the possible deportation of undocumented immigrants by pressuring school administrators to create “sanctuary campuses” that protect faculty, students, and staff from federal immigration authorities.

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

**THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY**

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

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

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

**SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES**

A nineteenth-century sociologist, Auguste Comte (1798–1857), was important not only for inventing the term **sociology** in 1839 but also for being the originator of sociology as a field. Crucial for our purposes here is his early distinction between what he called “social statics” and “social dynamics.” In his social statics, Comte looked at the various “parts” (structures) of society, such as the manufacturers and retailers of clothing fashions, and the ways in which they relate to one another as well as to the whole of society. In examining such relationships, Comte investigated social processes among and between parts of society as well as in society as a whole. However, under the heading of social dynamics, his main focus was on a specific social process—social change—and how the various parts of society change.

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

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) invented the term “sociology,” argued that the discipline should be a science, and created a general theory of the social world.
The elements of globalization can be divided between structures (e.g., the United Nations) and a variety of more specific social processes (e.g., the migration of people across national borders). In terms of consumption, we can think of the shopping mall (or Amazon.com) as a structure and the shopping (or consumption) that takes place in it as a process. Finally, the internet as a whole and social networking sites in particular are structures, while the communication and the social interaction that take place in them can be viewed as processes.

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

**SOCIOLOGY’S PURPOSE: SCIENCE OR SOCIAL REFORM?**

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

Many of today’s sociologists study social problems of all sorts, such as poverty and crime. They use a variety of scientific methods to collect large amounts of data on such problems (see Chapter 2). They also seek to use what they learn about those problems to suggest ways of reforming society. They believe that these two activities—scientific research and social reform—are not necessarily distinct; they can and should be mutually enriching. While many contemporary sociologists accept this position, a division has developed over time, with some sociologists focusing more on scientific research and others more engaged in activities designed to reform society and address social problems. The sociologists who engage in “pure science” operate with the conviction that we need to have a better understanding of how the social world operates before we can change it, if that’s what we want to do. The knowledge gained through social research may ultimately be used by those who want to change society, or to keep it as it is, but that is not the immediate concern of these researchers.

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

**ASK YOURSELF**

What do you believe is the best purpose of sociology: pure science or social reform? Why? Make a note to ask yourself this question again at the end of your course. Did you answer it differently?

**SOCIOLOGY, THE OTHER SOCIAL SCIENCES, AND COMMON SENSE**

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

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

One example of the gap between common sense and social scientific knowledge relates to perceptions of the causes of global warming. There is strong consensus in the global scientific community that global warming is occurring and that it is caused primarily by human activities, especially the burning of fossil fuels. However, data from a recent survey, illustrated in Figure 1.6, show that only 70 percent of Americans believe that global warming is happening and just 53 percent believe that it is caused by human activity. Furthermore, 28 percent

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

Rather than comparing and contrasting these fields in general terms, this concluding section will focus on the different ways in which these fields approach one of this book’s signature concerns—globalization.

- Anthropology: Focuses on cultural aspects of societies around the world, such as the foods people eat and how they eat them, as well as the differences among cultures around the globe (Inda and Rosaldo 2008).
- Communication studies: Examines communications across the globe, with the internet obviously focal concern in the contemporary world.
- Economics: Investigates the production, distribution, and consumption of resources through markets and other structures that span much of the globe, especially those based on and involving money.
- Geography: Studies spatial relationships on a global scale and maps those spaces (Herod 2009).
- Political science: Studies nation-states, especially the ways in which they relate to one another around the world as well as how they have grown increasingly unable to control global flows of migrants, viruses, recreational drugs, internet scams, and the like.
- Psychology: Examines the ways in which individual identities are shaped by increased awareness of the rest of the world and tensions associated with globalization (e.g., job loss), which may lead to individual psychological problems such as depression (Lemert and Elliott 2006).
think that there is a lot of disagreement among scientists about the causes of global warming (Howe et al. 2016). While common sense is important, even to sociologists, there is no substitute for the systematic study of the social world in both its minutest detail and its broadest manifestations.

**SUMMARY**

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

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

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

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

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

**KEY TERMS**

- agency, 18
- butterfly effect, 2
- consumption, 8
- dangerous giants, 18
- globalization, 8
- macro, 16
- McDonaldization, 10
- mediated interaction, 13
- micro, 16
- social construction of reality, 18
- social processes, 19
- social structures, 19
- society, 6
- sociological imagination, 15
- sociology, 3
- technology, 11

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

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

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

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

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

5. WikiLeaks has released thousands of confidential documents obtained from government, military, and corporate sources. Is this an example of an information war? Why or why not? What social structures have impeded the flow of this kind of information in the past? How have the internet and social networking sites made it easier to get around these structural barriers?

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

7. What is the difference between structure and agency? Within your classroom, could you be a “dangerous giant”? In what ways does your school prevent you from becoming a dangerous giant?
8. What do sociologists mean by the social construction of reality? How can you apply this perspective to better understand trends in the fashion industry?

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

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