

# INTRO TO SOCIOLOGY

## Rethinking Civilization

Dr. Gary Payne





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Gary Payne, Ph.D. June 2025 edition CC BY-NC-ND



## A WELCOME TO THE READER

**A**s I began my first college classes in the 1970s, I had just returned from duty aboard an aircraft carrier in the combat zone during the Vietnam War. I didn't understand my social world. Not at all. But I was ready to learn, for I had seen the consequences of ignorance, including my own. I was desperate for answers and solutions.

I found them in sociology.

I've since traveled across dozens of nations, visited their museums, lived among their people and held their babies from Ethiopia to Oman, Hong Kong to Surinam. I was packing camera gear but peering through the lens of sociology. This book emerged as an introductory guide to sociology, civilization...and you.

Chances are, you could benefit from a hefty dose of sociology too. It allows you to peer through the cultural barriers you inherited at birth and to get in touch with the facts of your own existence on this planet. And that understanding allows you the confidence to set an intelligent course for your own life.

But sociology is not merely about you, or me, as individuals. Its ultimate goal is greater freedom, fairness, happiness and survival for all of us. That's a path to peace.

Civilizations are always at risk, but never more than now. I know you're already aware that political chaos, climate change, extreme economic inequality and threats of worldwide warfare on a planet bristling with nuclear weaponry are sobering challenges for your generation and the children of the future.

To survive these challenges requires much better cooperation among nations. That means you and the other Earthlings on this planet are going to have to understand each other's social world, not just your own. For this, sociology is the tool of choice. In this book you'll study the big picture: human existence on the only Blue Planet in our galaxy.

My motive for writing and updating this book for free is that it might, in some way, help you make life on Earth better for yourself and all other living creatures. If it does, the benefits will eventually drift back towards me or someone I care about.

But now...a note of caution: sociology raises issues which are often very disturbing to the holders of power, wealth and tradition in any society. Sociology at the college level is courageous *if it is uncensored*; our need to survive predestines it as a liberating discipline. Looking back in history, it is a wonder that sociology lives on, having made so many capable enemies. The only explanation lies in its undeniable usefulness at improving societies by applying logic to evidence.

**Sociology is the scientific study of society.\*** Although the USA is a society with a record of many scientific achievements, few modern nations are less willing to apply sociological solutions than the USA. For reasons we shall examine later, the USA is a country that focuses almost exclusively on the behavior of *individuals*.

This tight focus on *individuals* has left most of our citizens with only a vague idea about what the terms "culture" or "society" even mean. But that offers sociology students like you an advantage in understanding humanity that relatively few in this nation possess.

Good luck in your effort to understand your social world. Never forget that because you are a part of this social world you are really studying yourself. But in this case, you will be studying yourself *from the outside in!* It will take a while to get comfortable with the sociological perspective. Be patient. There is a light up ahead. Ready? Scroll on down to Chapter 1.

\* These **bolded** statements are keys to an understanding of sociology.

# CHAPTER 1:

## SOCIOLOGY EMERGES AS A DISCIPLINE



Courtesy of the Museum of the Revolution, Havana, Cuba

The unique idea behind Sociology was that the *group* was the basic unit of humanity, not the individual. For example, the behavior of this man perched on the streetlight could only be understood in the context of his surrounding social environment. And the same is true for everyone in the crowd beneath him.

**S**ociology is an *objective* method of learning about the human social world. Instead of merely guessing, or taking the word of an authority, teacher, preacher, celebrity, parent, podcaster or the gang at the local bar, we use trusted statistics and surveys to get our facts. We compare our nation and states to other nations and states.

We *test* our assumptions (guesses) by carefully examining statistics or survey data to see if those assumptions are accurate...or not. And if we test *a whole set* of assumptions on a subject, we might be able to develop evidence for an explanation - a "theory" - about an entire subject area. Just one example: Do early childhood development programs like Head Start decrease rates of high school drop-outs, teen pregnancies and/or juvenile delinquency?

So then...**a theory is a systematic explanation of a subject backed up by a tested set of assumptions.** Yes, it *is* a lot of trouble to go through to find something out. But otherwise, what do we *really know* with any confidence?

We humans still do not make most of our decisions on a scientific basis. Our world view is usually guided by a desire to conform, or by orders or opinions from the authority figures surrounding us. They dominate our thought processes. We are also influenced by old cultural myths and forms of superstition that cannot even be scientifically tested. And sadly, science does not always give us the answers we *wish* were true. These are all reasons we so often ignore science, at our peril.

Using objective evidence to get answers is something new for humankind. It may not *seem* new to us, because everyone alive today has grown up with science as an influence in their lives. But in terms of human history, the use of the scientific method is only a few centuries old. You and I are the descendants of apes that were walking upright roughly two million years ago [1]. By that yardstick the scientific method is a very recent development.

You and I are, in many ways, still creations of our non-logical ancient past. The next few pages tell the story of how free thinkers broke through powerful barriers to using logic. It's a struggle still in progress and you'll be playing some part in it during your lifetime.

## HOW SCIENCE EMERGED FROM SUPERSTITION

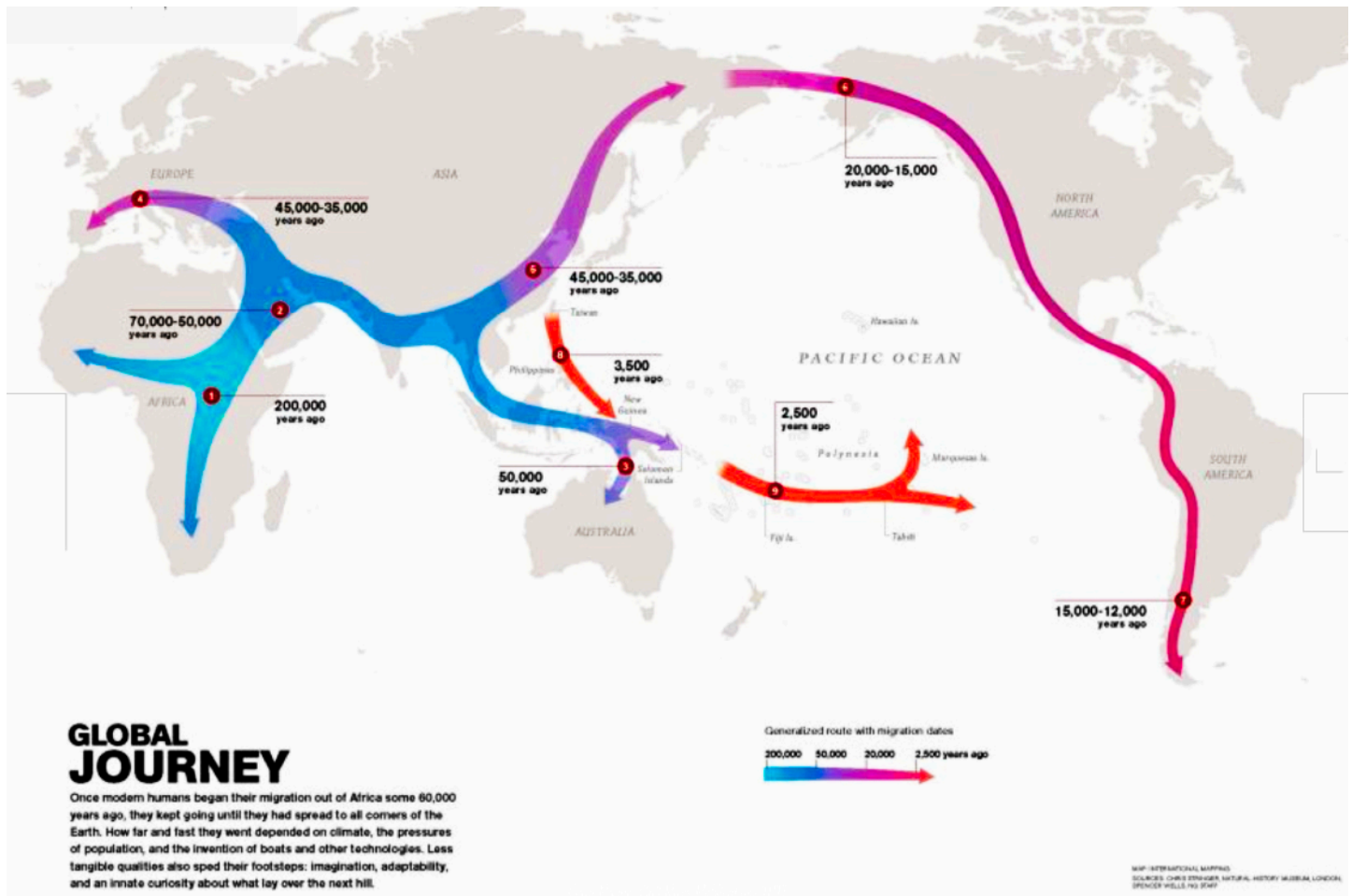
To explain the creation that is you (and me), we would need a time machine to (briefly) take us back to Africa at least 80,000 years ago. And we would need a way to enter the mind of these most advanced apes (*homo sapiens*) to see how well they were able to think about their own existence as they began to wander out of Africa.

We can't do that. And there is no written history going back that far either. But we know now that many of our ancestors scattered from Africa in all directions at that time (see map below). They were burying their dead, domesticating animals and drawing pictures on cave walls and rocky cliffs as they lived together in large numbers. These are behaviors that separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom. The story of human progress since then explains why you lived through the infancy period that killed most of our ancestors, why your cellphone works, and why you're able to read this book even though you probably aren't a lucky princess, king or priest.



# MAP 1.1: THE TIMELINE OF HUMAN MIGRATION FROM AFRICA

Source: Chris Stringer, Natural History Museum of London, Public Domain Image



Cave drawings and other artifacts of early humans show that humans wanted *explanations* about their own existence and *rules* of behavior to make life predictable and tolerable. It's likely that anyone who could put together a great story that covered those bases and that had a potentially happy ending for their death (or loved ones) would be listened to. Religious symbols are found so commonly in ancient settlements and burial sites that it's certain that explanations and rules were in great demand. Over time, simple religions became more complex.

The first *comprehensive* explanations are traced to religious leaders roughly 10,000 years ago in the empires of the Middle East. The religious elite of every continent were often the most literate citizens. They spent less time in everyday work and were therefore free to contemplate human existence. Thus, synagogues, temples, churches and mosques became the main intellectual centers of humanity. The unique religious stories and doctrines they created became deeply entrenched in every geographical area. Their written doctrines became sacred rulebooks, the foundation blocks of civilized behavior and thought.

It is very likely that these sacred texts often placed their authors in a very beneficial light.

Understandably, the priestly classes and castes were not appreciative of ideas that contradicted their unique version of reality. Religious beliefs tended to be portrayed as ***absolute truths: truths that allow no other explanation.*** But then *any* criticism directed at those beliefs posed a threat to the credibility of the entire religious institution. Religious leaders feared their regional critics and competitors, and often did what they could to eliminate them, setting the stage for the brutal religious wars that continue today.

These would not seem to be good conditions for an entirely new method of rational thinking to emerge. But that is what happened. Sociologist Randall Collins masterfully explained how and why the scientific method – and eventually sociology – came into existence.[2] I have condensed his explanation below.

A few human tribes in what is now referred to as Greece lived in *independent* "city-states" between the borders of Middle Eastern empires 2500 years ago. They were fortunate to have the intellectual benefits of nearby religious centers without being trapped inside them or a larger government. Free-thinking citizens were allowed to brainstorm here. They formed the first **secular (non-religious)** schools and communities without a fundamental built-in bias towards faith-based explanations or rigid political beliefs. **These secular Greek academic institutions were clearly the forerunners of higher learning, the colleges and universities that you are attending today.**



At the New Orleans Museum of Art: I am standing beside an exhibit of hundreds of ancient religious figures and symbols gathered from all over the world. At the time these artifacts were created they were taken very seriously as *absolute truths* by their worshippers. Yet they have all faded out over tens of thousands of years. One wonders how humans will view today's religious beliefs ten thousand years from today.

Philosophy was the initial focus. Among the familiar names are Plato and his famous pupil, Aristotle. Aristotle formed a school to train people to think logically. Aristotle's school gathered knowledge for its own sake, and thus this era is often called The Golden Age. We cannot call this *science*, because they did no scientific *testing* of theory. But the seeds of science were sown here, free from religious and political censorship.

This Golden Age was a rare moment. Religious and authoritarian powers soon re-dominated Greece. Superstition was back in control. But the Greek's use of logic and reason had already escaped to other lands. Arabian thinkers like Ibn Kaldun kept the Greek's free-thinking analysis alive during the centuries known as the "Dark Ages" when their ideas were nearly forgotten by European societies.

Thousands of years passed until religious universities allowed instructors to teach independently in cities like Paris in the 1200s. These schools were created to train lawyers and government officials. But some instructors began toying with ideas that *contradicted* the Church. Their young students were hungry for new ideas. And, once out of the box, these ideas raced across Europe despite savage attempts by the Church to stop it: scientists, philosophers and artists were frequently tortured, imprisoned or executed.

But the desire for higher education was so popular among the wealthy that this censorship in religious schools drove them to create *private* schools for their privileged sons and daughters. Here intellectuals turned towards "**Humanism,**" **a movement and set of ideas which looked to humanity - rather than religion - to find explanations** for the movement of the stars, for floods, drought and disease, for everything that interested, worried or fired up the imagination. This became known as The Renaissance by the 1500s.

The poorer citizens of Europe were left out of this educational revolution. But living and dying through three decades of bloody Catholic vs. Protestant Wars in the late 1600s - known as the "30 Years War" - had forced them to recognize that Christianity had profound disagreements within its own ranks. By 1700, a large fraction of Europe's Christians had killed each other.

The stage was set for a public acceptance of a new way of thinking. In France, Napoleon abolished the religious universities in 1794, putting secular ones in their place.[3]

It was no longer so dangerous (for example) to discuss in public the spherical shape of the Earth or how it revolved around the sun, popular issues from the "natural" sciences. But the **social sciences focus entirely on people**, and thus were even more controversial. That focus on very sensitive political and economic subjects like inequality and slavery was far more threatening to the wealthy elite and the governments they controlled.





Photo from the New Orleans Museum of Art

Executed by guillotine in 1797, King Louis XVI was the last of the Kings of France. His connections to the rich elite and the Church could not save him from public anger over inequality, corruption and the bankruptcy of his nation. His rule was followed by Napoleon Bonaparte, a champion of The Enlightenment's focus on logic and *secular* education.

**TABLE 1.1 THE TWO BASIC CATEGORIES OF SCIENCES**

**Examples of "Natural" Sciences**

Physics, Biology, Geology,  
Herpetology, Oceanography  
Astronomy, Ecology

**Examples of "Social" Sciences**

Sociology, Cultural Anthropology  
Political Science, Economics  
Cultural Geography, Psychology

And so, the social sciences could only tip-toe onto the scene after the natural sciences opened the door. It began with a book on *economics*; the free thinkers of the Renaissance had created businesses that needed experts on taxation. The author was Adam Smith, who explained the explosion of capitalism that was taking over Europe at that time in his popular book, *The Wealth of Nations*. It wasn't very controversial.

But when Germany became the first country in the world to make public education *compulsory for all its citizens* the social sciences really sprang to life all across Europe. This period in the late 1700s was called The Enlightenment, a movement that continues today, a recognition of the importance of evidence and logic.

Germany's universities became the most respected in the world. A wave of students from the USA left for Europe, for most U.S. universities were still dominated by *private religious* instruction. In fact, *public* education was not mandatory across the entire USA until the 1920s! This left many poor and middle-class citizens far behind while children from wealthy families were able to attend private schools.

Psychology followed economics as the next social science to break out as its own independent discipline. It evolved as a means of dealing with *individual* victims of stress, a narrow focus that would eventually make it the near opposite of sociology when it entered the scene.

Anthropology (the study of traditional cultures) was launched soon afterwards in reaction to Europe's fascination with tribal nations in the Americas. These vastly diverse Indian cultures had not been foretold in *any* religious documents. European society had portrayed itself as the God-given social order, an idea that anthropology now contradicted. Thus, anthropology had a revolutionary edge that was missing in economics and psychology.

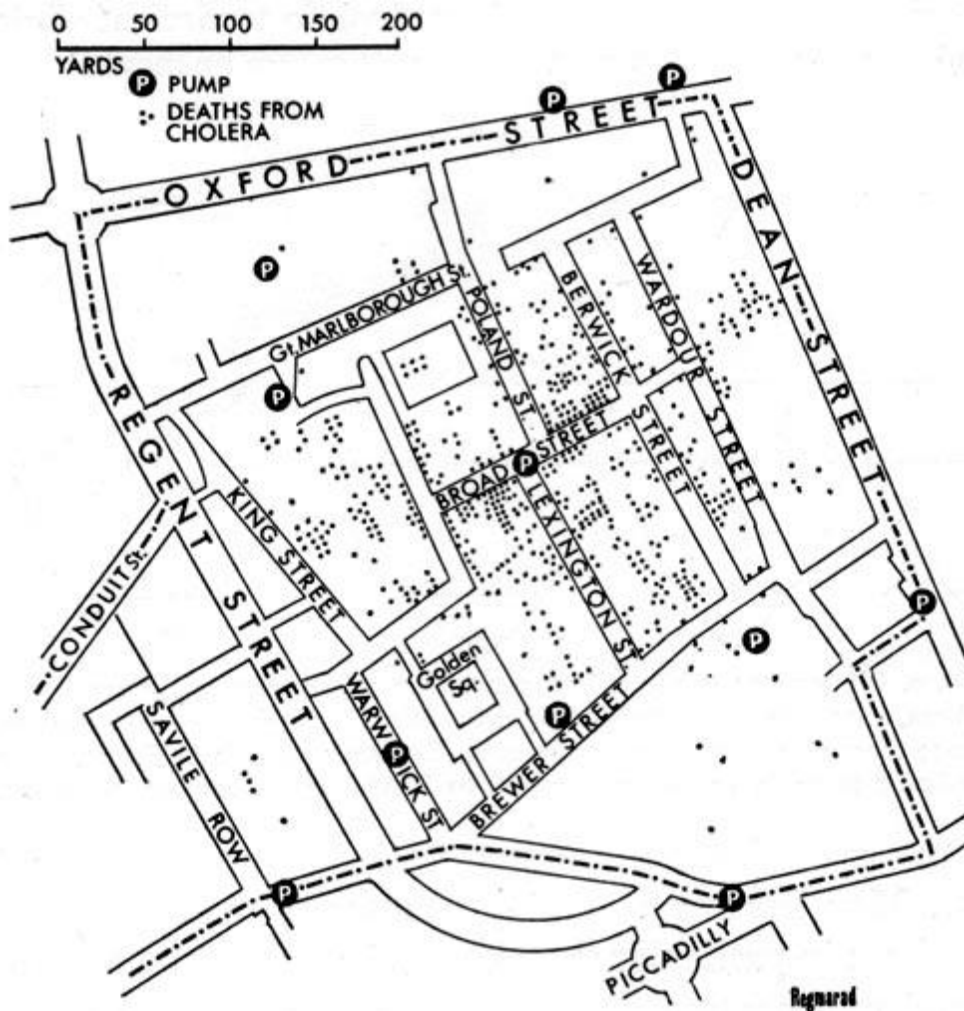
Sociology finally emerged as a combination of anthropology, politics, economics and even social reform! Yes, sociology had a split personality. Like anthropology, sociology was a study of groups and culture, but **sociology leaned towards solving social problems through greater use of statistical analysis** than the other social sciences.

## MAP 1.2: Using Logic to Stop Cholera Epidemics in 1854

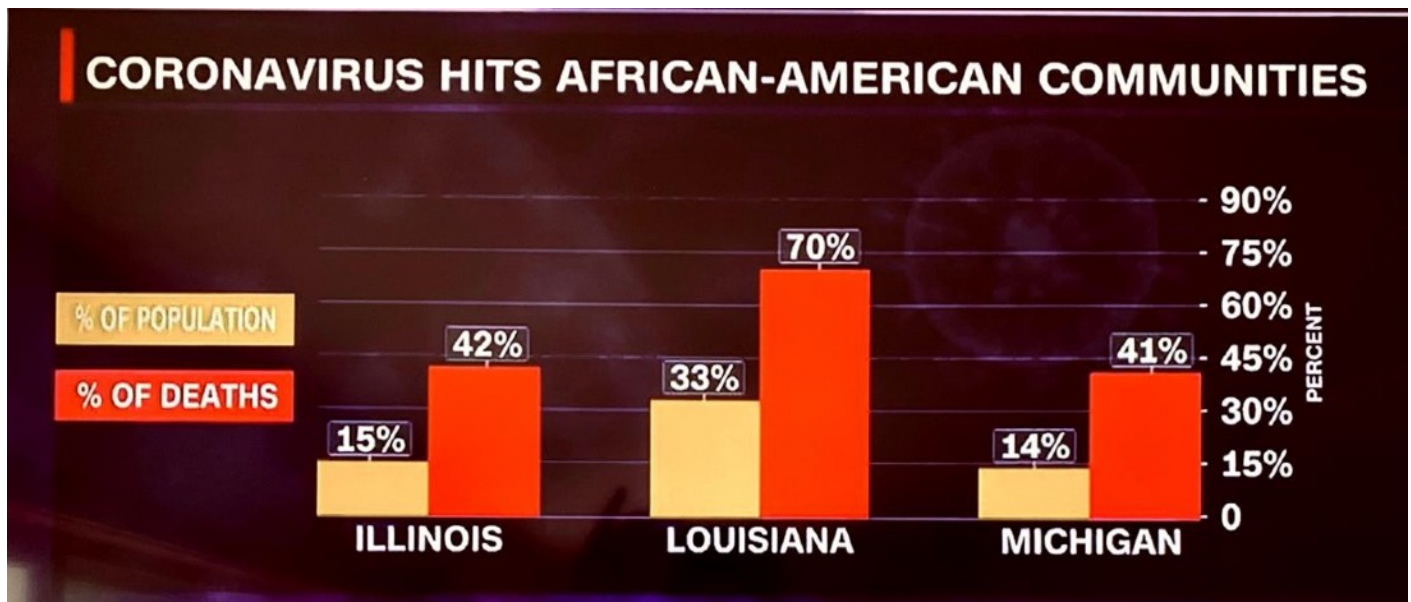
Cholera is a dreaded waterborne disease that can kill a healthy adult within three days of onset. Its victims lose control of their entire digestive system. We now know that millions of cholera deaths over countless centuries were due to severe dehydration. In Western societies these epidemics were routinely blamed on the popular targets of religious institutions: Jews, prostitutes, homosexuals, “witches” and “the Devil.”

But halfway through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British Doctor John Snow wisely applied *logic to evidence* and ended a terrible epidemic in London. Snow drew a street map of the affected portion of London and put a dot in the location of each known death of cholera. He noted that the dots seemed to be centered around the Broad Street water pump (find the P near the center of the dot mass below). This led Snow to suspect *that particular water well* was the source of cholera. Checking the victims confirmed that it had been their primary water source. When the pump was condemned, the epidemic ceased. Sewage on the streets had been leaking into that well.

John Snow’s use of logic was a gigantic leap forward for humanity. Snow fits into the branch of sociology known as **demography: the study of births, deaths and migration**.







This bar graph demonstrates a reality of life in our society today. It revealed the extremely high numbers of deaths Blacks experienced in the early days of the Corona pandemic compared to their proportion in the overall population. It's typical of the type of information sociologists study to spot glaring inequalities and develop solutions. Graph by CNN, April 13, 2020

Fundamental to sociology's solutions was a fair distribution of wealth and power in society. In those times it was a "reformist" stance that is referred to as a "progressive" approach today. The rich viewed it as dangerous because supporting oppressed groups (often despised by the rich) meant paying higher taxes or higher wages.

When the Nazi movement rose up in Germany some anthropologists and sociologists criticized Hitler's ideas as illogical and racist. In response, Hitler wiped out the entire secular wing of sociology. Many of the survivors fled to France and then fled again to the USA when France also became occupied by German Nazis.[4] Thus, for a brief period, the USA became a hideout for Jewish sociologists during the Nazi madness. Some returned to Europe after the war. But enough remained here to counter the rather timid character of early sociology in the USA, giving it a more controversial edge and worldly influences that make it a richer discipline today.

**Before migration of Jewish sociologists to the USA, the University of Chicago had dominated the sociological discipline.** It began in 1892 when John D. Rockefeller spent millions of dollars to recruit sociologists from all over the world. But this "Chicago School" of sociology had been designed by Rockefeller to be very tame in its approach to social problems. He wasn't eager to have his fortunes questioned. Nevertheless, the wave of fleeing Jewish sociologists to the USA forced the Chicago School towards a more courageous *social reform* stance.

Since then, the USA's top sociologists were recruited to our nation's most prestigious universities: Harvard, Columbia, Berkeley and the University of Wisconsin. Today, sociology departments exist in every public institution of higher learning. An *extremely tame* version of sociology can be found in the nation's high schools as well.

## THE EARLY FOUNDERS OF SOCIOLOGY, IN TIME ORDER

**August Comte (1798-1857)**

The term “sociology” was first used by French philosopher August Comte, who argued in 1838 for a *scientific* approach to the understanding of social change. Comte’s excitement led him to boast that sociologists would unlock the secrets of society. However, Comte’s sociology resembled philosophy much more than science in the beginning. There were a lot of theories put forward, but not much scientific testing to determine their accuracy.



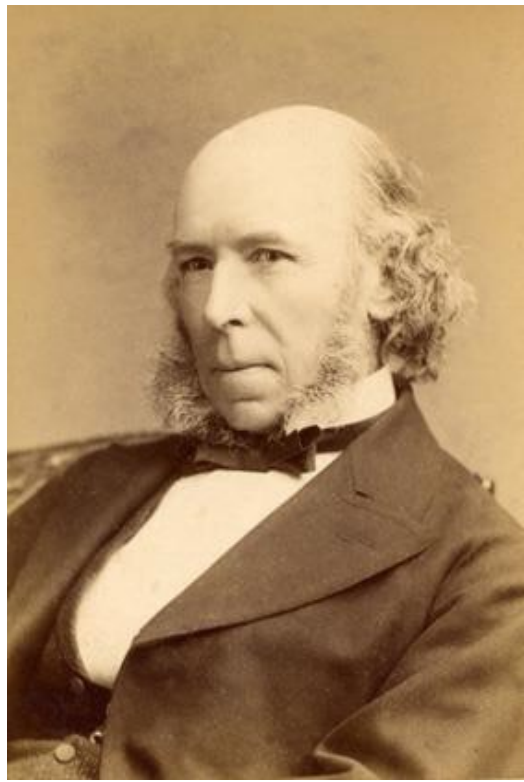
**August Comte**



**Harriet Martineau**

The first prominent woman sociologist to break through Europe’s censorship of female thinkers built on Comte’s demand for a *scientific* sociology. **Harriet Martineau created a set of objective research methods for sociology. Perhaps the most important was the “random sample,”** which made it easily possible to survey a huge population with a relatively tiny sampling of citizens. Today this is one of the most important tools in *all* of the social sciences, not merely sociology.

Martineau also did an excellent study of the difference between English and American societies which became a bestselling book, but it was ignored by both governments, because it criticized slavery and the oppression of women in that period.



**Herber Spencer**

Public domain

### **Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)**

The ideas of the wealthy and highly educated Scott known as Herbert Spencer do not appear in all introductory sociology texts, for he has become somewhat of an embarrassment to the discipline. His attempt to explain the difference in wealth between rich and poor groups in a society as merely a difference between well-adapted or poorly-adapted individuals is racist and classist by today's standards.

**Spencer misinterpreted Darwin's biological theory of 'natural selection,' claiming that the rich were the clear winners of the evolutionary process, and that the poor were the losers. His thinking was labeled, "Social Darwinism."**

Spencer claimed that it would be dangerous to tamper with this evolutionary process by helping the poor, for society would just be propping up *poorly adapted* losers. At the point at which England (mostly Protestant Christians) could have saved one million starving Irish Catholics during their potato crop famine of the mid-1800s, Spencer was asked by Parliament for his advice. He suggested that nothing should be done to help the poor, but that food should be *sold* into Irish markets. This meant that the rich Irish (who happened to be Protestant landlords favored by England) could survive while the poor Catholics died off around them, thereby "improving" society in the long term. Parliament took his advice which gravely deepened this historic tragedy for starving Irish Catholics.

War was good for society as well, according to Spencer. War sorted out winners and losers on the planet. And because the poor always do most of the dying in wars, he said that war is a useful way of ridding societies of these "maladapted" citizens. His theory was - and still is - a convenient one for the powerful and wealthy. It allowed them to dismiss the needs of poor citizens and soldiers while justifying their own high status and lifestyle.



**Spencer's hybrid theory was a serious misuse of Darwin's original theory of evolution because his explanation for inequality ignored several factors:**

- 1. That inheritance of wealth is not proof of biological or intellectual superiority.**
- 2. The control of economic policies by the rich that increased their wealth.**
- 3. The effect of centuries of brutal and oppressive tactics on the poor.**

Yet *Social Darwinism's* popularity among the wealthy was phenomenal. The rich appreciated having a "scientific" stamp of approval on their bloodlines and were not anxious to admit the absurdity of Spencer's spin on Darwinism. A few decades later, the less educated middle classes also engaged in the demonization of the poor, racial minorities and Jews in the 1940s.

Thirty years after Spencer's death, Adolph Hitler's right-wing effort to create a "super-race" at the expense of Jews, Blacks and other citizens would place him firmly in the *Social Darwinist* category as well. Many of the stereotypes associated with the poor, minorities or other less powerful people today are rooted in the belief that there is something *inherently defective and possibly evil* about these groups, with the opposite being true of the wealthy, or on many occasions, the white race.



We are often warned about real dangers of terrorism from foreigners. But in recent years most terrorist acts in the USA have been undertaken by our own citizens in groups that are rooted in the thinking of Herbert Spencer. They have killed many more of our nation's people than jihadists since the 9/11 attacks. Likewise, around the globe, right wing terrorism has tripled in recent years.[5] In 2021, a coup attempt failed at our nation's Capitol that was a popular cause of right wing rioters. As of this writing, over 500 have been tried, convicted by juries and imprisoned related to this event. They have since been pardoned. Spencer's ideas remain alive in a substantial fraction of the U.S. population.

In the USA, Spencer's themes have been detected in the writings and comments of various talk show hosts and authors. For example, here is one full and unedited paragraph from Chapter 4 of *The Way Things Ought to Be* by Rush Limbaugh:

*The poor in this country are the biggest piglets at the mother pig and her nipples. The poor feed off the largesse of this government and they give nothing back. Nothing.*

Published in 1992, Limbaugh's book was riddled with similar attacks on the lower classes and those who stood up for them in support. It became a "best-seller" on the New York Times book list. To further demonstrate support for Limbaugh's views our nation's Medal of Freedom was given to Limbaugh during a State of the Union speech in 2020. That high honor had previously been bestowed on Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other citizens whose contributions to society pointed in a very different direction.



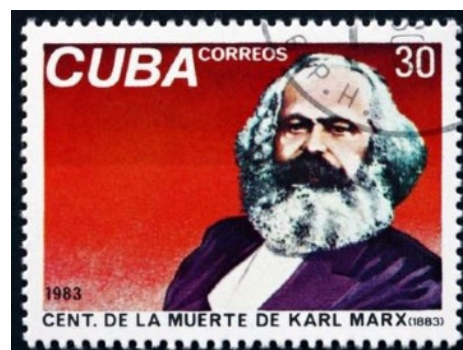
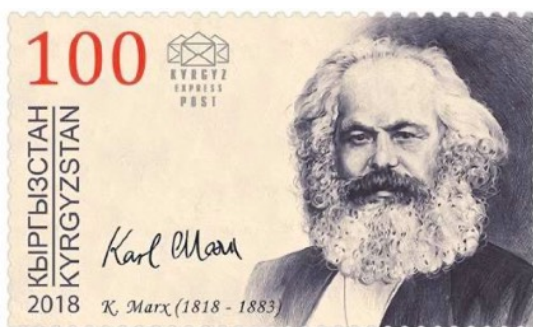
Photo by Gary Payne

Spencer's ideas helped trigger the flight of poor starving Irish Catholics to the U.S colonies after the Irish potato famine. As this grim Irish artwork (above) recalls, many died before they reached our shores.

The cruel historical consequences of Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism has led some sociologists to avoid addressing his ideas in some texts. But avoiding an analysis of his thinking is dangerous. In recent years, Spencer's ideas have become more popular; the number of hate groups across our nation is increasing.

Yet on a different topic, Spencer did contribute a very useful image of society to the sociological discipline. He described the organization of a human society as if it were a giant living organism. Spencer suggested that the various parts of society (labor, management, old, young etc.) may seem separate, but are totally interdependent. They may provide different functions, but they are all vital parts of *one* living social body, just as the arms and legs of an animal are ultimately interdependent. **As a society becomes organized, it gradually becomes its own separate beast, a creature greater than the sum of its parts.** On this, sociologists agree with Spencer.





## Karl Marx

### Karl Marx (1818-1883)

If Herbert Spencer was the champion of the rich, German-born Karl Marx was the fiery champion of the working poor. The contrast between the two men was blinding. Instead of viewing the rich as superior beings, Marx viewed the wealthy class as a collection of brutal and selfish thieves that made their money from slavery, corruption, inheritance and deceit.

Marx lived through years when child slavery was common in Europe and religious institutions were still making fortunes out of the kidnapping and sale of Africans into the Americas. His response was to write essays that triggered revolutions all around the world. Marx corresponded with Abraham Lincoln in letters and sent followers to join Lincoln's efforts against slavery in the USA.[6] Thus, Karl Marx touched all of humanity in ways that few of us in the USA have known.

Although **Marx has been one of the most quoted authors in academic journals worldwide**, the average U.S. citizen has had little or no contact with his controversial writings or ideas. There are two reasons for this:

1. **Marx is the most famous critic of capitalism, the *private* ownership of the means of economic production.** Capitalism's *private* ownership mode has dominated our economic system throughout our nation's history.
2. **Marx is also the most famous critic of religions in world history.** Capitalism and Christianity have been allies in fierce opposition to Marxist ideas.

Since we in the USA live in a very capitalist and religious country, **Marx has been heavily censored from school textbooks**. High schools and colleges have been eager to avoid a clash with powerful economic and religious interests that fear his influence. We don't see the face of Karl Marx on our postage stamps or money as in other nations (examples at top of page). Even today, many authors are reluctant to write anything positive about Marx's ideas because they fear being labeled a "Marxist." Their fear is not merely paranoia. Many scholars, artists, actors and writers who favored Marxist ideas were imprisoned in the 1950s while others fled the country, as we shall see in Chapter 2.



**Marx viewed society through a “*follow the money*” approach since he claimed the wealthy controlled society.** But he predicted that extreme inequality in capitalist economies would eventually force the working poor to seize control from the wealthy owners of the “**means of production**” (the factories, farms, mills, mines, schools, hospitals, etc.). He thought that these workers could then run these enterprises for *everyone’s* benefit, not merely for a few wealthy families at the top, but for the benefit of the whole society. Thus, **Marx defined this *public ownership of the means of production as socialism.***

Marx was a bit of a dreamer. He predicted that societies would eventually move beyond socialism to *perfect* equality. He defined this as ***communism, a classless society, sharing wealth and material objects in communities in such an elegant and selfless way that even government itself would no longer be necessary and wither away.*** But this has never happened anywhere in Western societies in the 150 years since his death. Some highly cooperative cultures of Indians in the Americas and a few traditional African cultures probably came closest to resembling his dream of a perfectly shared economy without a significant government.

Several revolutionary movements have since labeled their nations as “Communist” but their governments have never “withered away” as Marx had hoped. Marx would be dismayed at the brutally strict authoritarian control in a “communist” country like North Korea. But that was never what Marx had fought to create. Even before his life was over, Marx felt compelled to reject some of the activities that were taking place in his name.

Nevertheless, the ideas of Karl Marx did set western civilization on a jagged course towards greater fairness. Most democratic nations have moved in the direction of greater economic equality. All the Western European nations, Canada, Australia, Japan (and, to a lesser extent, the USA) became an economic *mix* of capitalism and socialism. If you are reading this book you are probably a student in a socialist entity: a *public* college or university. These *public* institutions are much more affordable than private (capitalist) colleges. They are also creations of “progressive” citizens who walked through the historical doorways that Marx broke open in the late 1800s.

So...what led Karl Marx to criticize the most powerful institutions in his lifetime?

Born into a Jewish family, Marx learned to fear religion. His father, a Jewish attorney, was forced by Christians to convert to be able to work. His scholarly investigation of the world’s religions led Marx to think that they were not the answer to humanity’s problems. In fact, he felt that religions *had become a major cause* of humanity’s problems.

**Marx called religion, “the opiate [drug] of the masses.”** He asserted that any escape from our troubled world into Heaven was not only fictitious, but also lulled individuals into inactivity on issues *that they should be raging against while still alive*: slavery, child labor, hunger and inequality. It was a stinging attack on the two most powerful elites: religious leaders and wealthy capitalists.

Religious leaders did not forgive Marx for his criticisms. They joined with the rich in chasing him from Germany. He left his job as a newspaper editor and fled to France, then later was forced to flee to England, where he continued to write until he died. Along the way, Marx met Friedrich Engels, a wealthy factory manager who recognized the genius of Marx and later bankrolled some of his written work. It seemed a strange friendship, given the anti-rich message Marx was putting out, but Engels turned out to have quite a passion for equality despite his personal wealth and a terrific intellect as well. Engels' name was soon found alongside Karl Marx, as they co-authored books together: *The Communist Manifesto*, and much later, *Das Kapital* (Translation: "The Money.")



In front of the Presidential Palace in Quito, Ecuador, year 2001      Photos by Gary Payne



On Plaza Bolivar, Caracas, Venezuela, year 2002



Central Bogota, Colombia, year 2000

The ideas of Karl Marx encouraged the oppressed groups of all nations to demand human rights and fair pay. After three successful socialist revolutions in (Mexico (1910), Cuba (1959) and Nicaragua (1979), the capitalist governments in South and Central America began using armored vehicles with water cannons, machine guns and massive front ramming blades to chase off protesters inspired by Marxist demands.



Public Domain photo

### Friedrich Engels

Engels secretly ghost-wrote some pieces that he had Marx sign as author, probably out of fear of what might happen to him. Together, this pair of social critics left a volume of written material that has been a thorn in the side of the rich ever since. Their “*follow the money*” approach to understanding all social problems cast a spotlight on issues from infant mortality to homicide. **Marx & Engels’ approach is known in sociology today as “conflict theory.”** The social safety net of government programs that exists in Europe and the USA (Medicare, Social Security, Head Start, etc.) are among many positive outcomes that flowed - in part – because of their voices.

### Max Weber (1864-1920)

Some sociology texts portray German sociologist Weber’s writings as *contrary* to Karl Marx suggesting that **Weber’s life was, “a debate with the ghost of Karl Marx”** (Marx was born a half century earlier). Nevertheless, Weber actually had a deep respect for Marx’s writings. Weber’s father was a prominent politician who huddled in secret meetings with wealthy German manufacturers in the family home. In this environment, Weber quickly learned the hidden realities of how the wealthy control a nation from behind the scenes. His was an upbringing with revelations very similar to that of Marx.





Max Weber

Public Domain photo

**But unlike Marx, Weber decided that society could best be understood by a “follow the *ideas*” approach, rather than “follow the *money*.”** Weber concentrated on the effects of powerful cultural *ideas* – especially religious ideas. Since these ideas are held to be *sacred*, they are rarely questioned, and therefore may be passed on across countless human generations, profoundly influencing the behavior and beliefs of those societies for centuries. He claimed that *ideas* control society, not merely *wealth* as Marx had claimed.

In his popular book, ***The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber claimed that capitalism was an outcome of the values found in the ideology of non-Catholic Christians (commonly referred to as “Protestants”).** Their dominant values were *hard work, independence and honesty*. He suggested that capitalism would not have developed without these Protestant values. This claim was a counter argument to Marx, who had claimed that religious ideas were merely tools that wealthy capitalists used to enslave the poor.

The other great debate Weber had with Marx focused on the wisdom of creating a society *based on equality*, as Marx had suggested would be good and inevitable. **Weber felt that ending exploitation of the poor was a worthy goal, but one that would require huge government bureaucracies to achieve, and this might become even more of a problem than inequality.**

Of course, Weber’s argument was welcomed by wealthy and powerful people who did not want to pay higher taxes for government support of the poor. But there was also some truth to it. The “withering away” of governments in socialist and communist countries that Marx had predicted never occurred. Certainly, government regulation of everything from clean drinking water to health care to workplace safety standards means hiring a *very large* number of regulators. Weber might say, “*ominously large*.”

The “ghost” of Karl Marx might reply to Weber that corporate capitalism has also created monstrous and ever-expanding bureaucracies like Walmart, Amazon, Exxon and McDonald’s. And furthermore, these capitalist behemoths force us to create giant government bureaucracies at the same time. Otherwise, how else can gigantic corporations be regulated and controlled if not by large governments?

In the last half century, moderately socialistic and democratic nations have emerged across Europe, in Canada and New Zealand. These nations run their economies with a mix of capitalism and extensive government control and entitlements – and they have seen huge improvements in the living standards of their people - while maintaining individual freedoms. This has clearly taken the wind out of Weber’s argument. Still, Weber’s influence has tempered sociology ever since.



**Emile Durkheim**

### **Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)**

Until the French sociologist/anthropologist Emile Durkheim arrived on the scene, sociology was just a random collection of thinkers with only a focus on groups and institutions. But that changed dramatically after **Emile Durkheim, the first sociological researcher**, completed his statistical study of suicide and revealed his conclusions to the academic world. His method of scientific testing of social theories became the core research technique employed by sociologists.

Durkheim understood that the key to the scientific method (for any science) is to look for conditions under which *something happens* and then contrast this with conditions under which *it does not happen*. In sociology, we do this as we search to discover *universal laws* that govern social behavior, and might even explain it. Identifying those laws allows us to find solutions to some very serious social problems.

Before Durkheim's study of suicide, human behavior was thought to be determined primarily *within the soul or mind of the individual*. Christian doctrine remains deeply rooted in this theme with its concepts of *individual* salvation/damnation depending only on the free will or soul of *the individual*. The basic idea behind the discipline of early psychology likewise targeted the *individual's* mind. The powerful influences of the *culture and social environment* around the individual were generally ignored by both Christianity and early psychology.

But Durkheim's research, published in his book *Suicide*, was a landmark study that jarred the academic and religious communities out of complacency. He demonstrated that suicide – seemingly *the most individual act* one could ever imagine (because it is an act performed *by an individual to that same individual*) – was actually determined by the culture and groups to which suicide victims were connected.

For example, in India, Hindu women at that time were expected to voluntarily burn alive on their dead husband's cremation fire. In Denmark, soldiers thought it a disgrace to die in bed of old age. Among the Ashanti of Africa, the king's servants were expected to die when or before the king died. Serious shame among the Japanese commonly led them to disembowel themselves with a knife in to recover their pride. In the USA, economic failure often led wealthy individuals to suicide. This was confirmed during the 1929 stock market crash in a human hailstorm of rich men jumping off the roofs of New York skyscrapers.

The USA and Europe also had a unique tradition of suicide related to romantic love failures not found in many cultures.

**Durkheim expanded his research on suicide across cultures to compare the rates, reasons and methods of suicide.** He found that *all three* varied wildly from culture to culture. This triggered a giant leap in understanding of the origins of *all* behaviors. It should have been obvious to the educated observers that suicide was primarily a *cultural* event, but they had cast their research net too narrowly.

For some researchers, Durkheim's compelling global summary of rates, reasons and methods of suicide would have been enough to make the point: The age-old focus on *individuals* for understanding human behavior was insufficient. But Durkheim didn't stop there. He also wanted to explain the variation in suicide rates *within* cultures too.

Durkheim found - by examining medical records and death certificates in European Nations - that the *rates* of suicide varied in Jewish, Catholic and Protestant populations. If suicide was purely an *individual* act, religious affiliation of the victims should not have influenced the *rates* of suicide. Yet it did, and it did so consistently in predictable patterns that left no doubt.





Open source photo

This 19<sup>th</sup> Century painting symbolizes the *Sati* custom of suicide for women whose husbands had died. Although it became illegal in the 1800s it continued well into 20<sup>th</sup> century India. *Sati* makes no sense to you readers in the USA because you've been shaped by a different culture. Durkheim found that the reasons, the rates and the methods of suicide are determined primarily by culture, not by individuals.

But how can cultural differences like religious affiliation determine the likelihood of suicide for an *individual*? **Durkheim theorized that an individual's mind and behavior are molded by social ties to others in intimate groups.** Interpersonal relationships that develop are influenced by the unique traditions of each faith. And those influences are so strong that we can measure the group-membership effects

on the probabilities of an individual's suicide. Our various cultural and group memberships determine our reasons, rates and methods of various behaviors, including suicide. It's baked in and yet most citizens in the USA don't realize it.

Among orthodox Jews was the notion of *collective* salvation, a concept that strengthened their *social ties*. They needed to stay close. And the long history of hostility towards Jews by the surrounding Christian faiths had also encouraged *dependence* between Jews. By necessity, this *dependence* on other Jews, and working together became a core tradition. This gave Jews the lowest suicide rates despite the discrimination they faced.

But for Protestants, a spirit of *independence* had emerged as a reaction to the rigid rules and excesses of the Catholic Church. This *independence* had set Protestants free to worship as they chose, but it led to *fewer and weaker social ties*, and (consistently) the highest rate of suicide among the religions that Durkheim studied.

The strength of social ties among Catholics ranged somewhere in between the two other faiths. Catholic suicide rates likewise fell predictably into the middle category.

All these factors led to Durkheim's "social ties" proposition: *The stronger and more plentiful an individual's social ties are, the less the likelihood of suicide*. And when tested statistically by examining death certificates, it held up in nation after nation. Furthermore, it was easily adapted to family life too. Single adults had higher suicide rates than married adults. Married adults without children had higher rates than married adults with children. The more and stronger ties to others were, the more protected individuals were from suicide.

So...if a *seemingly* individual act like suicide is not an individual act...then...what act is? Perhaps *none* are. We are *profoundly* social animals, more than we are willing to admit, and more than our cultural institutions are willing to recognize. **Durkheim's striking conclusion was that even what seems to be individual behavior, is actually determined by our socio-cultural environment.** At the very least, the *primary determinants* of our behavior are at the *group* level, and not at the individual level.

Once again, sociology found itself contradicting the basic notions of Western civilization. For if it was *our culture and social environment* that determined our individual behavior, how could *any single person* be blamed for inappropriate or criminal acts, or get all the credit for good behavior? How could prison be justified? How could the immense fortune of a billionaire be justified, especially in a country with widespread poverty?

Neither the prince nor the pauper truly deserved the fate they had been handed, for *their fates were not primarily of their own making*. The same contradiction applied to the religious concept of the sinner and the saint, regarding salvation and damnation. There were far-reaching social implications for Durkheim's findings. He opened a door of inquiry that has never closed, although many still shove hard against it.



These social influences go unnoticed by the individual. They surround us from our first childhood memories; we as individuals tend to take them for granted. The effect is nearly invisible to most citizens unless they study it statistically. Very few of us view our social world in this scientific way.



Photo by Gary Payne 2011, Ethiopia

Durkheim's "social ties" perspective becomes apparent when sociologists from individualistic cultures visit people from co-operative cultures like these Hamar tribe children in East Africa. The amazing closeness of their relationships makes them act more like a single organism than separate individuals and this has profound consequences for their behavior and sense of "self." Sharing comes easily in this culture where life seems more about "us" than merely "me." Loneliness is not a problem in the Hamar tribe.

Without Durkheim's addition to sociology, a purely sociological discipline might not have developed. The great sociological thinkers might just have been absorbed by other disciplines with which they were closely connected already. Armed with Durkheim's model of statistical analysis, sociological researchers began searching for other statistical evidence of the effect of social and cultural factors on individual behaviors.



## Homicide Rates per 100K Citizens by Nation 2023

Source: World Population Review    Figures are the most recent and are rounded.

El Salvador	52
U.S. Virgin Islands	49
Jamaica	43
Colombia	25
USA	5
Chile	4
Japan	0.2

Using *rates* we can fairly compare nations of all population sizes. The cross-cultural homicide rates above demonstrate the impossibility of explaining human behavior by differences within individuals, like mental “illness.” This 260-fold difference can only be explained by the design and conditions within each nation’s culture.

Since Durkheim’s work, sociologists have found that there are dozens of measurable social conditions (especially inequality) that can be statistically correlated to higher rates of crime, disease, infant mortality and other social problems. This has led most modern democratic societies - notably in Europe, Canada and Japan - to redesign economic policy in ways that encourage and allow individuals to live and act in a more positive manner. The result is better health, lower crime rates, and greater equality than is found in the USA.

The shift towards sociological policies has been delayed in the USA, with unfortunate consequences. The USA has fallen far behind the other modern industrial democratic nations on critical social indicators. Even *freedom* has been curtailed in the USA, as our nation suffers the highest *rate* of incarceration in world history.[8] Durkheim’s research has yet to be fully applied to our nation’s social policy. See Table 1.1 below.

### TABLE 1.1 BASIC SOCIAL INDICATORS OF RICH NATIONS

***The USA has highest per capita income, yet poorest outcomes***    Source: CIA World Factbook\* 2025

	USA	FRANCE	U.K.	GERM	JAPAN	CANADA	SWEDEN	AUSTRALIA
Per Capita Income \$	\$75	55	54	64	46	56	63	60
Infant Mortality								
Per 10K Live Births	510	310	380	310	190	384	230	290
Maternal Mortality								
Per 10K Live Births	21	8	10	4	4	11	5	3
Life Expectancy	80.9	82.6	82.0	85.2	84.2	82.9	82.9	83.3
Percent Pop. Obese	36	22	28	22	4	29	21	29

\*Not every nation reports this data every year; the most recent year is reported here. These figures are rounded.

## 20th Century Sociologists in the USA, in Time Order

### Jane Addams (1860-1935)

The founders of sociology were great thinkers and theoreticians. But for sociological principles to be placed into practice, social *activists* were required to step forward and engage the political process. This can be tough work, even dangerous, work. Most citizens never participate in it. A shining exception was Jane Addams.

Addams had withstood a difficult childhood. Her mother passed away when she was two years old. She understood hard times and the effect of personal disadvantage. Addams became a determined student and somehow worked her way into medical school in Philadelphia.

On a visit to England, Addams noticed that the poor of that nation were more supported than in the United States, where little or no social safety net existed. Addams opened Hull House in Chicago for poor immigrants that were flooding into the USA at that time from Europe. **Hull House was not merely a poorhouse, however. She used it as a think- tank for progressive ideas.** There, activists and intellectuals gathered to plan legislative campaigns that ended child slave labor practices.

**Addams won a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts in 1931.** She published written pieces in what had been a male-dominated American Sociological Review and continued her work as a tireless and successful lobbyist for the rights of children. She joined other sociologists to speak out forcefully against USA involvement in World War 1 which made her a controversial figure.



Jane Addams



Public Domain Photos W.E.B. Du Bois

**W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)**

**The first person of color to earn a doctoral degree at prestigious Harvard University was William DuBois, an African American sociologist.** DuBois went on to teach at several universities, but discovered along the way that his degree did not protect him from racial discrimination. He was the only black board member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which – ironically – was at first controlled by whites. Yet his sharp mind led him to become the editor of its widely read journal *Crisis* for 20 years.

**Du Bois became a famous critic of World War 1 (as did Jane Addams), which he claimed was merely a battle among rich countries to see which won the right to steal the fantastically abundant natural resources of Africa.** Du Bois was truly global in his outlook; he spent his last years in Africa. He died at the age of 95 while traveling through Ghana. By then, Du Bois had renounced his U.S. citizenship as a reaction to the treatment he had faced here in the land of his birth.



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**C. Wright Mills**

**C. Wright Mills (1916-19.**

A vocal critic of economic inequality arrived on the scene at a time when it was dangerous to speak out against the system in the USA. A man of enormous personal courage, C. Wright Mills published *The Power Elite* in 1957, a book which provided considerable evidence that the nation's foreign policy was being controlled from behind the scenes by large weapons manufacturers and top military leaders.

The nation was going through a wave of rabid anti-communism at the time, violating the free speech rights of dozens of actors, writers, publishers, movie directors and producers that had been critical of greed among the rich. Writing *The Power Elite* made Mills a target for harassment by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Unlike many social critics in the 1950s, Mills was never imprisoned despite his research which was designed to alert the public to the hidden financial reality that Marx and Engels had warned about earlier.



Mills' warning gained support from President Dwight Eisenhower, a former General in the U.S. Army and Commander of U.S. forces in World War II. His final speech as President startled the public by suggesting that the "military industrial complex" had indeed grown too powerful for the good of the nation. It was like a page from Mills' book, which Eisenhower had undoubtedly read. Below is a quote from President Eisenhower's famous speech:

"We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations. This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience.

The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist..." [9]



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As a conservative Republican - and former Commander in Chief of all Allied forces – Dwight Eisenhower seemed an unlikely supporter of the themes in *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills. But as President, he had witnessed war profiteering and undue corporate influence in governmental affairs.

However, **C. Wright Mills is best known for another written work he produced: *The Sociological Imagination*, in which he encouraged his students to peer through the haze of their own limited personal experience. Mills wanted us to**

see far more than our own families, schools, churches and communities ever intended that we see; to become truly aware of the wider world, of points of view that challenge the sacred beliefs we were raised with, and to find creative new ways to make the world a better place.

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 - 1968)**

**The youngest person ever to receive a Nobel Peace prize was the famous civil rights activist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** Although he is often regarded primarily as a religious figure, his background in sociology at Morehouse University in Atlanta - where he earned his Bachelor's degree - is less well known. **Dr. King found a method to make peaceful changes against a backdrop of intense white resistance to black equality.**

Courtesy Marion S. Trikosko, Flickr Public Domain



Dr. King (center) chats with Malcolm X before a news conference in 1964. Both gifted civil rights leaders were assassinated by 1968; neither man had reached 40 years of age.

Dr. King traveled to India in the 1950s to study the peaceful techniques of “non-violent non-cooperation” which had been used by social activist Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi had used labor strikes and massive *peaceful* marches to win India’s independence from Britain without significant bloodshed. By the time Blacks in the USA began demanding civil rights in the early 1960s, King was a seasoned sociologist who understood how inequality could be *peacefully* challenged.

King's peaceful marches – and the Montgomery bus boycott he helped to engineer - were often met with violence by white supremacist groups and massive brutal arrests by poorly educated police. These glaring episodes of open racism became a national embarrassment as they were filmed by reporters and aired on television. This triggered a worldwide public outpouring of support for the civil rights movement using the same successful strategy Gandhi had used decades earlier in India.

Landmark civil rights laws were then passed that many U.S. citizens point to as the most important achievement of the 20th century. It might not have had a chance without Dr. King's willingness to reach outside his own culture's ideas for a progressive solution borrowed from India.

Both Dr. King, and his mentor Gandhi, lived to see enormous social progress as a result of their activism. But both were assassinated soon afterwards. Dr. King was one of several black civil rights leaders who were gunned down in the 1960s; he was shot to death on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee. That motel has been converted into a giant museum related to the Civil Rights movement. His legacy is very much alive.

## **SOCIOLOGY'S MAIN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The first sociological pioneers like Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx offered “grand” theories” (we call these “theoretical perspectives”). There are major differences in their approach and some sociologists align their research with one perspective while still maintaining respect for the value of all of them. Sociologists keep their research practical by testing a single element of these grand perspectives, one at a time. This allows objectivity without losing track of the basic point of view. Some examples:

A Functionalist-oriented sociologist might survey participants in a motorcycle gang to see what *function* extreme drug use rituals play in the gang's leadership roles.

A Conflict-oriented sociologist might use statistical correlations to check for a link between the high school dropout rate and the homicide rate in a city or county.

An Interactionist-oriented sociologist might observe a newly arrived migrant population in a neighborhood to see how they *define* the new cultural situations they encounter as they arrive.

Gradually, these three main theoretical perspectives have survived to this day in sociology:

1. Functionalist, 2. Conflict and 3. Interactionist perspectives. These perspectives often pop up in class discussions so it's worth understanding their basic approaches. The first two perspectives are summarized in FIGURE 1.1 below.

The Interactionist perspective will be addressed in Chapters 4 & 5.



## TABLE 1.2: The Functionalist vs. Conflict Perspective

### **FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE**    **Originators: Emile Durkheim & Herbert Spencer**

**Society's Image:** Society's parts work like the parts of a body, in harmony, providing *functions* for each other and the whole of society.

**Explanation for the Social Order:** Individuals are naturally cooperative and willing to accept their social system as it is, like ants working together in an ant farm, accepting of the ruling Queen.

**Basic Research Question:** What *function* is provided by each social arrangement being studied? Examples: What is the point of a marriage ceremony, or a funeral, or a tattoo?

**View of Social Change:** If change comes quickly, it may cause breaks in vital social ties between individuals, causing social problems. Very rapid changes like long nationwide labor strikes thus would be seen as a *dysfunction*, a disorder in society.

**Weakness:** The functionalist perspective does not question the unfairness and unequal power arrangements in a social system, and therefore may not encourage change towards justice. Its research findings are often convenient for the powerful because their advantage is not the main point of interest.

### **CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE**    **Originators: Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels**

**Society's Image:** Society is like a poker game of competing interests, each one fighting to get their share.

**Explanation for the Social Order:** Order is maintained mostly by force or coercion. We follow the rules like ants in an ant farm because we have little choice or are forced to.

**Basic Research Question:** *Who benefits* from any given social arrangement?

**View of Social Change:** Change is necessary for justice, and equality. Protests for change and Union strikes for higher wages or better working conditions are beneficial to society.

**Weakness:** This perspective doesn't sufficiently recognize that people *do* want to cooperate, even in systems that aren't perfectly fair and just. Also, some claim conflict theory is too "materialistic," for it seems to suggest that wealth is the only serious measure of human happiness.

# Quote to Ponder



If we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

**Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.**  
**Beyond Vietnam Speech**

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