



CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

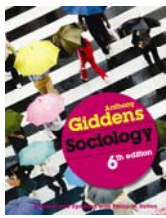
CHAPTER COMMENTARY

Chapter 1 is designed as a way in to both the subject and the textbook itself. It sets itself three basic tasks. First, it addresses the question 'What is sociology?' whilst also presenting the discipline to readers as a 'dazzling and compelling enterprise' by illustrating its scope, significance and its power. Second, it sketches the historical emergence of sociology, locating it firmly within the social conditions of the time. Third, it introduces a series of perspectives or schools of thought that inform much sociological practice. The content and style of the chapter make it an essential staging post both for those students with no previous sociological background and also those moving up from more basic 'primer books'. It gives the reader an immediate feel for the book's approach and can usefully be combined with the preliminary sections titled 'About this book' and 'Organization of the book'. It would be well worth covering this chapter even if you are only intending to 'dip into' a small number of the other chapters. As well as setting out what sociology *is*, it also offers some answers to the question 'What is sociology *for*?'

The chapter starts by giving the reader a feel for the scope of the subject and the use of the **sociological imagination** to move beyond the assumption that our personal experiences are reliable evidence for understanding societies or the whole of social life. This is illustrated in the discussion of an 'everyday' activity: drinking a cup of coffee. The text points to five ways in which coffee drinking can be viewed afresh if we 'think ourselves away' from the 'immediacy of personal circumstances':

- (a) the symbolic value of coffee drinking as a social ritual;
- (b) coffee's status as an accepted Western drug which contrasts both with substances deemed anti-social in the West and the prohibition of coffee in other cultures;
- (c) coffee's availability as a commodity, the result of a complex system of production and distribution operating across the globe;
- (d) the relatively recent introduction of coffee into Western diets in the late nineteenth century on the back of colonial expansion in South America and Africa;
- (e) the significance of coffee drinking as a 'lifestyle choice' in terms of the brands people choose, their attitudes to the manner in which the product is manufactured and traded, and even where they choose to sit and drink it.

The text uses this to move on to one of C. Wright Mills's famous notion of the relationship between public issues and personal troubles. This section invites readers to locate themselves within wider social relations by considering their own demographic characteristics. It also asks them to consider the relationship between freely willed individual actions and the patterning effect of **social structure**. The chapter emphasizes the interrelationship between individual behaviour and the patterning effects of social institutions and introduces Giddens's own concept of **structuration** to describe this ongoing process of social reconstruction.



What is Sociology?

Having established the basic mental tools for thinking sociologically, the chapter turns to the benefits that accrue for individuals and societies as a result of their application. First, sociology's comparative approach encourages greater awareness of cultural differences and a better understanding of the specific problems of others. Second, a sensitivity to the intended and unintended consequences of action is an aid to better evaluation of policy initiatives and the formation of more effective policy. Third, it offers self-enlightenment: it is not just policy-makers who have the right and ability to make decisions about people's lives. Both as individuals and members of groups, sociology offers people the chance to change.

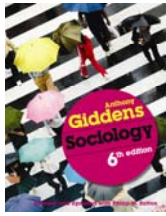
The chapter then moves on to introduce some key thinkers in the sociological canon, tracing the common themes linking contemporary sociology with its roots in the twin revolutions that began in the Europe of the 1780s, particularly the effects of the **Industrial Revolution**. The timeless questions that do this are:

- (a) What is human nature?
- (b) Why is society structured as it is?
- (c) How and why do societies change?

Comte is presented as the inventor of the term 'sociology', seeking to place the subject on a scientific footing as the positive science that could be used to comprehend and then improve human societies. As such, sociology should be concerned only with 'observable entities that are known directly to experience', an idea now associated with the term **positivism**. Durkheim is linked to Comte's scientific project but develops it through an emphasis on **social facts** and the application of natural scientific methods to social inquiry. Durkheim's interest in social change, most notably in the increasingly complex division of labour, is based on the threat to social cohesion that this causes and the **anomie** which individuals experience as a result. According to Durkheim, such feelings of meaninglessness and dread drive some to commit suicide. The concept remains important today because it claims to show the power of the social in shaping individual action and it is an empirical example of Durkheim's scientific approach to sociology.

Marx is located within the same struggle to come to terms with rapid change in society, with particular reference to the link between the economic and the social spheres. Marx's main focus of course was on **capitalism** and the separation of society into capital owners and wage labourers – two groups whose interests were inherently conflictual. This analysis was grounded in his wider **materialist conception of history** and his argument that class struggle was the primary motive force in history. Marx predicted capitalism's future replacement by a system with communal ownership and egalitarian social relations.

Weber's work is wide-ranging, and to a large extent sets up a debate with that of Marx, in particular Weber's greater emphasis on the role of ideas and beliefs in social change and less reliance on the power of class conflict. Weber was important in stressing what was (religiously) distinctive about the Western societies in comparison with other major civilizations. In Weber's thought capitalism becomes just one among many forces shaping social change. The text introduces the Weberian notion of an **ideal type**, the distilled construction that has become a central part of the social scientist's armoury. Of great importance to Weber is **rationalization**, a blend of science, technology and bureaucratic organization, all directed towards the achievement of greater efficiency. In addition to the thinkers discussed in the text, this section includes boxed biographical material on two possible 'neglected founders': Harriet Martineau and Ibn Khaldun, as a way of encouraging students to reflect on the rise of the present sociological canon.



What is Sociology?

The rest of the chapter is concerned with forging links between the founders and the way that sociologists have operated in more recent times. This will be a very important section for many students whose prior studies have been rooted in contemporary issues and who are sceptical about the persisting value of the classics or simply fail to spot their pervasive influence in current theories. The focus here is not on high-profile individuals but on the way that classical sociology maps onto different approaches or perspectives. Although these perspectives are seen to be associated with the 'big three' they are presented in a descriptive way that allows multiple linkages to be made. Three broad perspectives are identified: **functionalism**, **conflict theories** and **social action theories**. Within the latter there is special attention given to **symbolic interactionism**.

Functionalism is traced through Comte and Durkheim and is presented in terms of its use of organic analogy, its emphasis on moral consensus and its near hegemony during the careers of Parsons and Merton. Some common criticisms of the general approach are briefly alluded to, most notably the problematic nature of the concept of 'system needs'. Conflict theories encompass a whole range of approaches that take a similarly systemic overview of social life but pay far more attention to issues of power and inequality. The text uses Dahrendorf as an example of someone working in this tradition with a debt to both Marx and Weber. Social action perspectives by contrast pay far more attention to the meaning of action and interaction among individuals and Weber is brought forward as their major advocate. Symbolic interactionism is discussed as the most highly developed example of this type of approach. The text focuses on Mead's interest in the role of the **symbol** in language and meaning. It is the sharing of this symbolism that shapes all interactions.

The chapter concludes by acknowledging that newcomers to sociology will find enormous diversity in theoretical approaches, but also arguing that it is a healthy disagreement and implying that sociologists actually share a basic commitment to a disinterested study of modern societies. Brought into being by the desire to understand modern societies, sociology retains this brief but concerns itself also with more general questions about human social behaviour. The subject is both abstract and practical, at its best when deployed imaginatively to illuminate everyday life. The comparative method is central to this, contrasting values and practices which we regard as 'taken for granted' with those of different places and times. There is thus an explicit link to the following two chapters on research methods and theories.

TEACHING TOPICS

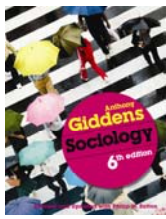
1. Thinking like a sociologist

Arising from the section 'The development of sociological thinking' (pp.10 –27), the aim of this topic is to introduce students to what sociology is and how it is practised. As it might well be the first session on many courses, the activities are designed to introduce self-reflection from the start. In particular, task **C** would be a useful icebreaker with a new group.

2. Sociology past and present

Based on the sections 'Founders of Sociology' and 'Modern theoretical approaches', this topic aims to match thinkers to concepts and to demonstrate continuity and change in the sociological tradition.

3. What is sociology good for?



This topic covers the short section 'Why study sociology?' and aims to sensitize students to the complex relationship between sociological knowledge and its relationship with the rest of society.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Thinking like a sociologist

A. Read pages 5–9 of the text. Then study this passage by C. Wright Mills:

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables [the sociologist] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

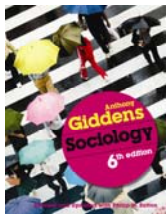
The first fruit of this imagination – and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it – is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of a man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of 'human nature' are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and by its historical push and shove.

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise ...

(Wright Mills, C. 1970 *The Sociological Imagination* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) pp. 11–12)

1. On the basis of your reading, offer short definitions of 'sociology' and 'the sociological imagination'.
2. Mills writes of the need to become aware of all those individuals in similar circumstances to oneself. Make a list of the possibilities and limitations of this idea.

B. Think again of the way the text 'sociologizes' the action of drinking a cup of coffee. Carry out a similar exercise with one or more of the suggested examples:



What is Sociology?

- a man cleaning his car on a Sunday morning;
- a woman jogging in the park;
- a person in a suit queuing for the bus to work.

Most students initially find it difficult to 'think themselves away', precisely because they are expecting the answers to be less 'obvious'. If you're not sure how to extend the coffee model to other situations, go back to the seven broad themes set out at the start of the book and use them as a guide. One example might look something like this:

The sociology of a man cleaning his car on a Sunday morning

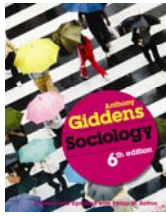
- The car is a symptom of the industrialized West – both cause and effect of rapid social change in the twentieth century (*world in change*).
- Car manufacturers now export to every part of the globe. Some cars (like the Ford Mondeo) are manufactured according to a global division of labour. Equally, the same car may have a different price depending where and when you buy it (*globalizing of social life, comparative stance*),
- Cars, especially certain types of car, can be seen as symbols of status or virility (*links to class and gender*). More generally, they are often viewed as symbols of freedom, mobility and affluence.
- It's a Sunday, so we assume this is a leisure activity. Sunday is, after all, a day when it is the norm not to work in Western Christian societies (*comparative stance*). However, the cleaner of the car may be: (a) a taxi driver maintaining his vehicle, (b) a showroom car cleaner doing overtime, or (c) reluctantly carrying out a chore at the behest of their partner (*personal = the social*).
- It's a *man* cleaning the car, which raises issues around stereotyped interests and leisure activities. Is there a woman in the background? What is she doing on a Sunday morning: having breakfast in bed or performing acts of domestic labour? (*questions of gender*)
- The individual's act of car ownership goes beyond his immediate context. He could be cleaning it in preparation for a day out. If countless other individuals are making the same decision, there will be unintended social consequences (they will all be sitting in a traffic jam). Equally, he is using water for a non-essential use. Globally, the politics of water is of enormous significance, and the ability to lavish scarce resources on the upkeep of a consumer durable is a luxury specific to affluent First World countries.

These are just a few of the ways a sociologist could make sense of the 'everyday'. Now try nominating your own everyday activities and then reanalysing them sociologically.

C. Read the following extract by Zygmunt Bauman:

We can think of at least four quite seminal differences between the ways in which sociology and common sense – your and my 'raw' knowledge of the business of life – treat the topic they share: human experience.

To start with, sociology (unlike common sense) makes an effort to subordinate itself to the rigorous rules of *responsible speech*, which is assumed to be an attribute of science. This means that the sociologists are expected to take great care to distinguish – in a fashion clear and visible to anybody – between the statements corroborated by available evidence and such propositions as can only claim the status of a provisional, untested guess ...



What is Sociology?

The second difference is related to the *size of the field* from which the material for judgement is drawn. For most of us, as non-professionals, such a field is confined to our own life-world: things we do, people we meet, purposes we set for our own pursuits and guess other people set for theirs ... and yet, given the tremendous variety of life-conditions, each experience based solely on an individual life-world is necessarily partial and most likely one-sided. ... It is for this reason that the sociologists' pursuit of a perspective wider than the one offered by an individual life-world makes a great difference – not just a quantitative difference (more data, more facts, statistics instead of single cases), but a difference in the quality and the uses of knowledge.

The third difference between sociology and common sense pertains to the way in which each one goes about *making sense* of human reality; how each one goes about explaining to its own satisfaction why this rather than that happened or is the case. Those who more than anyone interpret the world for us ... portray the complex problems of nations, states and economic systems ... as the effects of the thoughts and deeds of a few individuals one can name. ... Sociology stands in opposition to such a personalized world-view. ... When thinking sociologically, one attempts to make sense of the human condition through analysing the manifold webs of human interdependency – that toughest of realities which explains both our motives and the effects of their activation.

Finally, let us recall that the power of common sense over the way we understand the world and ourselves depends on the apparently self-evident character of its precepts. ... In an encounter with that familiar world ruled by habits and reciprocally reasserting beliefs, sociology acts as a meddlesome and often irritating stranger. It disturbs the comfortably quiet way of life by asking questions no one among the 'locals' remembers being asked, let alone answered. Such questions make evident things into puzzles: they defamiliarize the familiar.

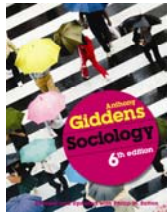
(Zygmunt Bauman, *Thinking Sociologically*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 11–15, passim)

1. Consider again the subsection 'Studying people and society' on pages 8-9. Try to write a short biographical sketch, saying how you came to be doing sociology and why you think it might be important. Now read it again. How might your account look different if it was 'sociological' in the sense Bauman suggests?
2. Discuss a number of your 'biographies' as a class. Is it possible to see ways in which studying sociology might be contributing to a process of 'structuration'?
3. Think about the possible implications of challenging commonsense views of the world in this way. Write down examples where sociology might be considered 'meddlesome and irritating'.

Activity 2: Sociology past and present

A. Read pages 10–26 of the text on sociological theories. Now look at the lists of thinkers and concepts given below. Use a pencil to construct a diagram of connections and flows between them. There may be more than one line of connection between each. How many different sets of links can you identify?

This exercise should give you a fair idea of 'who belongs with what' and, more importantly, why? Think about why you make the linkages you do and be prepared to justify them to the rest of the class.



What is Sociology?

COMTE	SOCIAL FACTS SOCIOLOGY
MARX	RATIONALIZATION SCIENCE
DURKHEIM	SOCIAL CHANGE ANOMIE
WEBER	CAPITALISM POWER
MARTINEAU	BUREAUCRACY DIVISION OF LABOUR
MEAD	SEXUALITY

B. Now focus on the modern theoretical approaches discussed on pages 22–26. For each of the three perspectives write down the one thing that is distinctive about it. Compare these again with the ideas of the early thinkers. Is it right to speak of different schools of thought stemming from particular thinkers or do they all fit comfortably within a single sociological tradition?

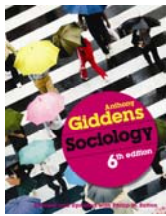
Activity 3: What is sociology good for?

A. Read the section ‘Why Study Sociology?’ on pages 28–30. Then study this brief extract by Bauman:

Sociological thinking is, one may say, a power in its own right, an *anti-fixating* power. It renders flexible again the world hitherto oppressive in its apparent fixity; it shows it as a world which could be different from what it is now. It can be argued that the art of sociological thinking tends to widen the scope, the daring and the practical effectiveness of your and my *freedom*. Once the art has been learned and mastered, the individual may well become just a bit less manipulable, more resilient to oppression and regulation from outside, more likely to resist being fixed by forces that claim to be irresistible.

(Bauman, *Thinking Sociologically*)

1. Think about personal or social situations where a sociological imagination would have been useful.
 2. List some prominent ‘public issues’ that could benefit from a greater sociological analysis.
 3. Reflect on the concept of change through self-enlightenment. Is a greater awareness of one’s own behaviour necessarily the path to greater freedom? Try to think of reasons why this might not be the case.
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REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Thinking like a sociologist

- Why do we find it difficult to 'think ourselves away' from everyday life?
- Why do our actions so frequently have 'unintended consequences'?
- Is the study of sociology more likely to aid social transformation or reproduction?

Sociology past and present

- What was Comte's view of sociology as a discipline?
- What did Durkheim mean by 'social facts'?
- Is sociology still 'about' the same things as it was 100 years ago?

What is sociology good for?

- Is sociology actually any use? If so, what for?
- Does greater self-awareness necessarily mean greater happiness?
- What would be involved in a 'sociology of sociology'?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. 'The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise' (C. Wright Mills). Explain and evaluate this claim.
2. How far is sociology a child of the nineteenth century?
3. Make a case for the introduction of sociology as a National Curriculum subject.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Thinking like a sociologist

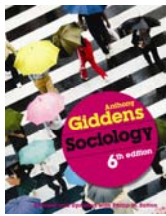
By definition, this topic has potential links everywhere in the book. In particular the foundational ideas of Marx and Weber recur in Chapters 11 and 16. Other obvious links are with the treatments of research methods and sociological theory in chapters 2 and 3.

Sociology past and present

A first look at some of the main concepts and thinkers within the discipline. This tradition is revisited and developed further in chapter 3.

What is sociology good for?

This first raises the issue about the discipline's relationship with the wider society. This reappears later in the coverage of research methods in chapter 2. The notion of self-enlightenment is introduced here and this could be regarded as setting the scene for the subsequent discussion of the individual in Chapters 7 and 9.



What is Sociology?

SAMPLE SESSION

Thinking like a sociologist

Aims: To introduce the notion of the sociological imagination and promote the development of sociological thinking.

Outcome: By the end of the session students will be able to:

1. Define 'sociology' and 'the sociological imagination'.
2. Understand the model example 'The sociology of coffee'.
3. Apply the model to a new social situation.

Preparatory tasks

Read pages 5–9 of *Sociology* and Activity 1. Complete question 1 by preparing definitions of 'sociology' and 'the sociological imagination'.

Classroom tasks

1. Tutor-led feedback of definitions. Leave definitions on board/flip chart throughout session. (10 minutes)
2. Tutor presentation of the example 'The sociology of coffee'. (5 minutes)
3. Split class into small groups allocating each group one example from Task B to discuss. (10 minutes)
4. Tutor-led feedback from groups writing up responses as spidergram. (10 minutes)
5. Put students in pairs to complete Task C as an oral rather than written exercise. (10 minutes)
6. Tutor-led feedback brainstorming reasons for doing sociology as a spidergram.

Assessment task

Prepare a diagram using 'The sociology of coffee' as a model to show 'The sociology of studying sociology'.