







# THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

# 1

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- L01** Explain what sociology can contribute to our understanding of social life.
- L02** Identify what is meant by the sociological imagination.
- L03** Explain how we can develop a global sociological imagination.
- L04** Describe the historical context in which sociological thinking developed.
- L05** Discuss why early social thinkers were concerned with social order and stability.
- L06** Identify reasons why many later social thinkers were concerned with social change.
- L07** Discuss how industrialization and urbanization influenced theorists such as Weber and Simmel.
- L08** Describe key differences in contemporary functionalist and conflict perspectives on social life.
- L09** Identify key differences in contemporary symbolic interactionism and postmodernist perspectives on social life.

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ot For Sale

# College Life and the Consumer Society

**What I enjoyed about college was that I was able to walk away with a degree and go find a job,** but what I regret most is getting a credit card, racking it up and getting multiple credit cards and doing the same thing, 'cause now I have to deal with it and I'm paying it off



John Giustina/Iconica/Getty Images

● **Young people who run up credit card debt may find that paying off the debt can take decades.**

now and it's kinda hard to deal with. Things that I charged on my credit card in college were those spring break vacations, going out to eat with friends numerous times. Other things were like materialistic things like clothes, accessories, makeup—all that good stuff—trying to keep up with everyone else. [Slight laugh.] I wish I could do those things now. Now, I can't have those things; I have to do with what I've got. . . . I can't enjoy the things I enjoyed in college because I enjoyed them in college. I guess when I was making the purchases in college with my credit card saying, "Oh, I can just pay that off later," I figured I would be making more money than what I was given through financial aid and through my parents, [but] in reality, you're not. You have to compensate for other things like tax being taken out of your salary, groceries, gas is something I didn't even think about because my parents always paid it. I mean, all those little things: They will add up!

—Robyn Beck (2012), a college graduate struggling to pay off \$7,000 in credit card debt with high interest rates, explaining how 20 percent of her take-home salary was going toward reducing her college debt.

**L**ike millions of college students in the United States and other high-income nations, Robyn Beck quickly learned both the liberating and constraining aspects of living in a "consumer society" where many of us rely on our credit cards to pay for the goods or services we want or need. For many years companies targeted college students, trying to get them to apply for a credit card regardless of whether they had the financial ability to pay off their balance. However, in 2009 Congress passed the Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure (CARD) Act, which, among its provisions, makes it illegal for companies to issue credit cards to persons under age twenty-one unless these persons can provide proof that they have the means to pay their bills or unless an adult (age twenty-one or over) cosigns the application. Although such measures may reduce excessive consumerism among college students, they do not eliminate overspending among many individuals at one of the most costly periods in their life. Not only

on college campuses but also across nations and the entire world, consumerism is an important aspect of social life in the twenty-first century.

Why are sociologists interested in studying consumerism? Sociologists study the *consumer society*—a society in which discretionary consumption is a mass phenomenon among people across diverse income categories—because it provides interesting and important insights into many aspects of social life and our world. In the consumer society, for example, purchasing goods and services is not limited to the wealthy or even the middle class; people in all but the lowest income brackets spend time, energy, and money shopping, and some amass large debts in the process. According to sociologists, shopping and consumption—in this instance, the money that people spend on goods and services—are processes that extend beyond our individual choices and are rooted in larger structural conditions in the social, political, and economic order in which we live. In the second decade of the twenty-first century,

# Sociology AND EVERYDAY LIFE

## How Much Do You Know About Consumption and Credit Cards?

True	False	
T	F	1. The average U.S. household owes more than \$10,000 in credit card debt.
T	F	2. The average debt owed on undergraduate college students' credit cards is less than \$1,000.
T	F	3. Fewer than half of all undergraduate students at four-year colleges have at least one credit card.
T	F	4. College students spend more money online than people in any other age category.
T	F	5. Consumer activist groups have been successful in getting Congress to pass a law requiring people under age 21 to get parental approval or show that they have sufficient income prior to obtaining a credit card.
T	F	6. More than one million people in this country file for bankruptcy each year.
T	F	7. If we added up all consumer debt in the United States, we would find that the total amount owed is more than \$1.5 trillion.
T	F	8. Overspending is primarily a problem for people in the higher-income brackets in the United States and other affluent nations.

Answers on page 7.

many people have had financial problems not only because of their own consumerism but also because of national and global economic instability. In addition, the process of globalization has dramatically affected consumerism and shifted the worldwide production and distribution of goods and services.

Why have shopping, spending, and credit card debt become major problems for some people? How are social relations and social meanings shaped by what people in a given society produce and how they consume? What national and worldwide social processes shape the production and consumption of goods, services, and information? In this chapter we see how the sociological perspective helps us examine complex questions such as these, and we wrestle with some of the difficulties of attempting to study human behavior. Before reading on, take the Sociology and Everyday Life quiz, which lists a number of commonsense notions about consumption and credit card debt.

## Putting Social Life into Perspective

**Sociology is the systematic study of human society and social interaction.** It is a *systematic* study because sociologists apply both theoretical perspectives and research methods (or orderly approaches) to examinations of social behavior. Sociologists study human societies and their social interactions to develop theories of how human behavior is shaped by group life and how, in turn, group life is affected by individuals.

Sociological studies range in size from a focus on entire nations and large-scale organizations and institutions to an analysis of small groups and individual interactions.

To better understand the scope of sociology, you might compare it to other social sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, economics, and political science. Like anthropology, sociology studies many aspects of human behavior; however, sociology is particularly interested in contemporary social organization, relations, and social change. Anthropology primarily concentrates on human existence over geographic space and evolutionary time, meaning that it focuses more on traditional societies and the development of diverse cultures. Cultural anthropology most closely overlaps sociology. Unlike psychology, sociology examines the individual in relation to *external* factors, such as the effects of groups, organizations, and social institutions on individuals and social life; psychology primarily focuses on *internal* factors relating to the individual in explanations of human behavior and mental processes—what occurs in the mind. Social psychology is similar to sociology in that it emphasizes how social conditions affect individual behavior. Although sociology examines all major social institutions, including the economy and politics, the fields of economics and political science concentrate primarily on a single institution—the economy

**sociology** the systematic study of human society and social interaction.



or the political system. Topics of mutual interest to economics and sociology include issues such as consumerism and debt, which can be analyzed at global, national, and individual levels. Topics of mutual interest to political science and sociology are how political systems are organized and how power is distributed in society. As you can see, sociology shares similarities with other social sciences but offers a comprehensive approach to understanding many aspects of social life.

## Why Should You Study Sociology?

Sociology helps us gain a better understanding of ourselves and our social world. Sociology offers us new insights into our lives as well as an opportunity to learn about other people. It enables us to see how behavior is largely shaped by the groups to which we belong and the society in which we live. By studying sociology, you can gain valuable new tools that will help you in daily life and provide important insights into your interactions with others. One of these insights is how to think sociologically, which means focusing on the “big picture” of social life rather than analyzing what other people do based on our own experiences. When we think sociologically, we look beyond ourselves to see how all people are affected by their friends, families, schools, neighborhoods, communities, and the nations in which they live.

Most of us take our social world for granted and view our lives in very personal terms. Because of our culture’s emphasis on individualism, we often do not consider the complex connections between our lives and the larger, recurring patterns of the society and world in which we live. Sociology helps us look beyond our personal experiences and gain insights into society and the larger world order. A **society** is a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant

**cultural expectations**, such as the United States, Mexico, or Nigeria. Examining the world order helps us understand that each of us is affected by *global interdependence*—a relationship in which the lives of all people are intertwined closely and any one nation’s problems are part of a larger global problem.

Individuals can make use of sociology on a more personal level. Sociology enables us to move beyond established ways of thinking, thus allowing us to gain new insights into ourselves and to develop a greater awareness of the connection between our own “world” and that of other people. According to the sociologist Peter Berger (1963: 23), sociological inquiry helps us see that “things are not what they seem.” Sociology provides new ways of approaching problems and making decisions in everyday life. Sociology also promotes understanding and tolerance by enabling each of us to look beyond our personal experiences (see ● Figure 1.1).

Many of us rely on intuition or common sense gained from personal experience to help us understand our daily lives and other people’s behavior. *Commonsense knowledge* guides ordinary conduct in everyday life. We often rely on common sense—or “what everybody knows”—to answer key questions about behavior: Why do people behave the way they do? Who makes the rules? Why do some people break rules and other people follow rules?

Many commonsense notions are actually myths. A *myth* is a popular but false notion that may be used, either intentionally or unintentionally, to perpetuate certain beliefs or “theories” even in the light of conclusive evidence to the contrary. For example, one widely held myth is that “money can buy happiness.” By contrast, sociologists strive to use scientific standards, not popular myths or hearsay, in studying society and social interaction. They use systematic research techniques and are accountable to

Health and Human Services	Business	Communication	Academia	Law
Medicine Nursing Physical Therapy Occupational Therapy Counseling Education Social Work	Advertising Labor Relations Management Marketing	Broadcasting Public Relations Journalism Social Media	Anthropology Economics Geography History Information Studies Media Studies/ Communication Political Science Psychology Sociology	Law Criminal Justice Mediation Conflict Resolution

● **FIGURE 1.1** FIELDS THAT USE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

In many careers, including jobs in health and human services, business, communication, academia, and law, the ability to analyze social science research is an important asset.

Source: Based on Katzer, Cook, and Crouch, 1991.

# Sociology AND EVERYDAY LIFE

## ANSWERS to the Sociology Quiz on Consumption and Credit Cards

1. **True.** The credit card debt owed by the average U.S. household (that had credit card debt) in 2012 was \$15,587.
2. **False.** The average outstanding credit card balance on U.S. undergraduate college students' cards in 2012 was \$755.
3. **False.** About 85 percent of U.S. undergraduate college students have at least one credit card.
4. **True.** College students are the biggest spenders online in the United States, and most of the purchases are for clothing and digital technology.
5. **True.** Aggressive marketing of credit cards to college students is illegal in the United States. The Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure (CARD) Act made it illegal for banks and credit card companies to continue the business practice of routinely sending out mailings and engaging in campus solicitations for new cardholders.
6. **True.** In the United States, 1.3 million people filed for bankruptcy during the 12-month period ending June 30, 2012 (the latest data available, but typical for a 12-month period).
7. **True.** The U.S. total consumer debt was about \$2.75 trillion in 2012.
8. **False.** People in all income brackets in the United States have problems with overspending, including excessive use of credit and not paying off debts in a timely manner, at least partly caused by difficult economic times.

Sources: Adapted from Crutsinger, 2012, and SallieMae.com, 2012.

the scientific community for their methods and the presentation of their findings. Although some sociologists argue that sociology must be completely value free—without distorting subjective (personal or emotional) bias—others do not think that total objectivity is an attainable or desirable goal when studying human behavior. However, all sociologists attempt to discover patterns or commonalities in human behavior. For example, when they study shopping behavior or credit card abuse, sociologists look for recurring patterns of behavior and for larger, structural factors that contribute to people's behavior. Women's studies scholar Juliet B. Schor, who wrote *The Overspent American* (1999: 68), refers to consumption as the “see–want–borrow–buy” process, which she believes is a comparative process in which desire is structured by what we see around us. As sociologists examine patterns such as these, they begin to use their sociological imagination.

### The Sociological Imagination

How can we make a connection between our personal experiences and what goes on in the larger society? Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959b) described the process of making this linkage the *sociological imagination*—the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society. This sociological awareness enables us to understand the link between our personal experiences and the social contexts in which they occur. The sociological imagination helps us distinguish between personal troubles and social (or public) issues. *Personal*

*troubles* are private problems that affect individuals and the networks of people with which they regularly associate. As a result, those problems must be solved by individuals within their immediate social settings. For example, one person being unemployed or running up a high credit card debt could be identified as a personal trouble. *Public issues* are problems that affect large numbers of people and often require solutions at the societal level. Widespread unemployment and massive, nationwide consumer debt are examples of public issues. The sociological imagination helps us place seemingly personal troubles, such as losing one's job or overspending on credit cards, into a larger social context, where we can distinguish whether and how personal troubles may be related to public issues.

### Overspending as a Personal Trouble

Although individual behavior can contribute to social problems, our individual experiences are influenced and in some situations determined by the society as a whole—by its historical development and its organization. In everyday life we often blame individuals for “creating” their own problems. If a person sinks into debt because of overspending or

**society** a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations.

**sociological imagination** C. Wright Mills's term for the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society.



Alfredo Images/Getty Images

● Because of an overreliance on credit, many Americans now owe more than they can pay back. This couple is signing up for debt consolidation, a somewhat controversial process that may help them avoid bankruptcy.

credit card abuse, many people consider it to be the result of his or her own personal failings. However, this approach overlooks debt among people who are in low-income brackets, having no way other than debt to gain the basic necessities of life. By contrast, at middle- and upper-income levels, overspending takes on a variety of other meanings.

At the individual level, people may accumulate credit cards and spend more than they can afford, thereby affecting all aspects of their lives, including health, family relationships, and employment stability. Sociologist George Ritzer (1999: 29) suggests that people may overspend through a gradual process in which credit cards “lure people into consumption by easy credit and then entice them into still further consumption by offers of ‘payment holidays,’ new cards, and increased credit limits.”

**Overspending as a Public Issue** We can use the sociological imagination to look at the problem of overspending and credit card debt as a public issue—a societal problem. For example, Ritzer (1998) suggests that the relationship between credit card debt and the relatively low *savings rate* in the United States constitutes a public issue. In 2012 U.S. credit card debt was estimated to be at more than \$600 billion, while the savings rate continued to diminish. Because savings is money that governments, businesses, and individuals can borrow for expansion, a lack of savings often creates problems

for future economic growth. Some practices of the credit card industry are also a public issue because they harm consumers. Credit card companies may encourage overspending and then substantially increase interest rates and other fees, making it more difficult for consumers to pay off debts. Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination* (1959b) is useful for examining issues because it helps integrate microlevel (individual and small-group) troubles with compelling public issues of our day. Recently, his ideas have been applied at the global level as well.

## The Importance of a Global Sociological Imagination

Although existing sociological theory and research provide the foundation for sociological thinking, we must reach beyond past studies that have focused primarily on the United States to develop a more comprehensive *global* approach for the future. We also must be able to engage with diverse groups of people who come from backgrounds with different economic, cultural, political, and social norms from our own. This is the nature of our lives in the twenty-first century. We cannot pretend that the United States is the only country that matters or that all people everywhere will necessarily see social issues or problems in the same way that we do.

In the twenty-first century, we face unprecedented challenges, ranging from global political and economic instability to environmental concerns and natural disasters and terrorism. All of the nations of the world are not on equal footing when it comes to economics and politics. The world’s **high-income countries are nations with highly industrialized economies; technologically advanced industrial, administrative, and service occupations; and relatively high levels of national and personal income.** Examples include the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe (see ● Map 1.1). As compared with other nations of the world, many high-income nations have a high standard of living and a lower death rate because of advances in nutrition and medical technology. However, everyone living in a so-called high-income country does not necessarily have a high income or an outstanding quality of life. Even among middle-income and upper-income people, problems such as personal debt may threaten economic and social stability.

In contrast, **middle-income countries are nations with industrializing economies, particularly in urban areas, and moderate levels of national and**





High income: New York, United States



Low income: Congo



Middle income: China



● **MAP 1.1** THE WORLD'S ECONOMIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
High-income, middle-income, and low-income countries.

Photos: © Cengage Learning. Photos, left to right: Syracuse Newspapers/John Berry/The Image Works; Gable/Alamy; philipbigg/Alamy.

**personal income.** Examples of middle-income countries include the nations of Eastern Europe and many Latin American countries, where nations such as Brazil and Mexico are industrializing rapidly. **Low-income countries are primarily agrarian nations with little industrialization and low levels of national and personal income.** Examples of low-income countries include many of the nations of Africa and Asia, particularly the People's Republic of China and India, where people typically work the land and are among the poorest in the world. However, generalizations are difficult to make because there are wide differences in income and standards of living within many nations (see Chapter 9, "Global Stratification").

The global expansion of consumerism, including online shopping and the proliferation of big-box retail establishments such as Walmart, shows the influence of U.S.-based megacorporations on other nations of the world. Consider Walmart, for example. Sam Walton opened his first Walmart store in Rogers, Arkansas, in 1962, and the company's home office was established in Bentonville, Arkansas, in the early 1970s. From a small-scale, regional operation in Arkansas, the

Walmart chain has now built a worldwide empire. Applying our global sociological imagination to a study of Walmart helps us gain a better understanding of how this once small U.S. organization came to have a massive influence on the lives of people around the world (see "Sociology in Global Perspective").

Throughout this text we will continue to develop our sociological imaginations by examining social

**high-income countries** (sometimes referred to as **industrial countries**) nations with highly industrialized economies; technologically advanced industrial, administrative, and service occupations; and relatively high levels of national and personal income.

**middle-income countries** (sometimes referred to as **developing countries**) nations with industrializing economies, particularly in urban areas, and moderate levels of national and personal income.

**low-income countries** (sometimes referred to as **underdeveloped countries**) primarily agrarian nations with little industrialization and low levels of national and personal income.



# SOCIOLOGY in Global Perspective

## Global Walmartization: From Big-Box Stores to Online Supermarkets in China

**D**id you know that:

- Walmart has more than 10,000 stores in 27 countries and that more than half of all Walmart stores worldwide are located outside the United States?
- Walmart operates nearly 300 stores, including supercenters, neighborhood markets, and Sam's Clubs, in China?
- Walmart is a major player in the credit card business in China, where people in the past were opposed to buying anything on credit?

Although most of us are aware that Walmart stores are visible in virtually every city in the United States, we are less aware of the extent to which Walmart and other big-box stores are changing the face of the world economy as megacorporations expand their operations into other nations and into the credit card business.

The strategic placement of Walmart stores both here and abroad accounts for part of the financial success of this retailing giant, but another U.S. export—credit cards—is also part of the company's business plan. Credit cards are changing the way that people shop and how they think about spending money in emerging nations such as China. For example, Walmart China is aggressively seeking both shoppers and credit card holders. By encouraging people to spend money now rather than save it for later, corporations

such as Walmart that issue “co-branded” credit cards gain in two ways: (1) people buy more goods than they would otherwise, thus increasing sales; and (2) the corporation whose “brand” is on the credit card increases its earnings as a result of the interest the cardholder pays on credit card debt.

The motto for the Walmart credit card in China is “Maximizing value, enjoying life,” and this idea encourages a change in attitude from the past, when—regardless of income level—most residents of that country did not possess credit cards. This has brought a corresponding surge in credit card debt, which can be partly attributed to aggressive marketing by transnational retailers but also to credit card companies encouraging consumers to buy now, pay later. But Walmart is not stopping there: the company also now owns a controlling (51 percent) interest in Yihaodian, an online Chinese supermarket that sells food, cosmetics, clothing, and consumer electronics to more than one million registered users in five major cities in China.

Throughout this course, as we study the social effects of major changes in societies, such as industrialization, urbanization, and the progression of the digital age, we will see that many of the issues we discuss, such as consumerism and globalization, have both positive and negative effects. Global consumerism, whether in big-box stores or through credit cards or electronic commerce, provides a window through which we can observe how an issue such as shopping affects all of us. Among the poor and those most hard-hit by difficult economic times, the lack of ability to purchase basic necessities is a central litmus test for analyzing quality of life and social inequality. Among persons in the middle class, purchasing power is often used to determine social mobility (the ability to move into) or social stability (the ability to stay on) the middle rungs of a society's ladder of income and wealth. Among persons in the upper class, high rates of luxury consumerism are often seen as an outward sign of “having it all.” As we will see, ideas related to consumerism and globalization vary widely across nations.



AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko

● An exciting aspect of studying sociology is comparing our own lives with those of people around the world. Global consumerism, as evidenced by the opening of a Walmart Supercenter in Shanghai, China, provides a window through which we can observe how issues such as shopping and credit affect all of us. Which aspects of this photo reflect local culture? Which aspects reflect a global cultural phenomenon?

### reflect & analyze

Are people in the United States unique in how we view consumerism? In how we view Walmart and other big-box stores? What do you think?

Sources: Based on Lemaire, 2012; Reuters, 2012; Walmart.com, 2012; Walmart Corporation, 2012.

life in the United States and other nations. The future of our nation is deeply intertwined with the future of all other nations of the world on economic, political, environmental, and humanitarian levels. Whatever your race/ethnicity, class, sex, or age, are you able to include in your thinking the perspectives of people who are quite different from you in experiences and points of view? Before you answer this question, a few definitions are in order. *Race* is a term used by many people to specify groups of people distinguished by physical characteristics such as skin color; in fact, there are no “pure” racial types, and the concept of race is considered by most sociologists to be a social construction that people use to justify existing social inequalities. *Ethnicity* refers to the cultural heritage or identity of a group and is based on factors such as language or country of origin. *Class* is the relative location of a person or group within the larger society, based on wealth, power, prestige, or other valued resources. *Sex* refers to the biological and anatomical differences between females and males. By contrast, *gender* refers to the meanings, beliefs, and practices associated with sex differences, referred to as *femininity* and *masculinity*.

In forming your own global sociological imagination and in seeing the possibilities for sociology in the twenty-first century, it will be helpful for you to understand the development of the discipline.

## The Origins of Sociological Thinking

Throughout history, social philosophers and religious authorities have made countless observations about human behavior, but the first systematic analysis of society is found in the philosophies of early Greek philosophers such as Plato (ca. 427–347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). For example, Aristotle was concerned with developing a system of knowledge, and he engaged in theorizing and the empirical analysis of data collected from people in Greek cities regarding their views about social life when ruled by kings or aristocracies or when living in democracies (Collins, 1994). However, early thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle provided thoughts on what they believed society *ought* to be like, rather than describing how society actually *was*.

Social thought began to change rapidly in the seventeenth century with the scientific revolution. Like their predecessors in the natural sciences,

social thinkers sought to develop a scientific understanding of social life, believing that their work might enable people to reach their full potential. The contributions of Isaac Newton (1642–1727) to modern science, including the discovery of the laws of gravity and motion and the development of calculus, inspired social thinkers to believe that similar advances could be made in the systematic study of human behavior. As Newton advanced the cause of physics and the natural sciences, he was viewed by many as the model of a true scientist. Moreover, his belief that the universe is an orderly, self-regulating system strongly influenced the thinking of early social theorists.

## Sociology and the Age of Enlightenment

The origins of sociological thinking as we know it today can be traced to the scientific revolution in the late seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries and to the Age of Enlightenment. In this period of European thought, emphasis was placed on the individual’s possession of critical reasoning and experience. There was also widespread skepticism regarding the primacy of religion as a source of knowledge and heartfelt opposition to traditional authority. A basic assumption of the Enlightenment was that scientific laws had been designed with a view to human happiness and that the “invisible hand” of either Providence or the emerging economic system of capitalism would ensure that the individual’s pursuit of enlightened self-interest would always be conducive to the welfare of society as a whole.

In France, the Enlightenment (also referred to as the *Age of Reason*) was dominated by a group of thinkers referred to collectively as the *philosophes*. The philosophes included such well-known intellectuals as Charles Montesquieu (1689–1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), and Jacques Turgot (1727–1781). For the most part, these men were optimistic about the future, believing that human society could be improved through scientific discoveries. The philosophes believed that if people were free from the ignorance and superstition of the past, they could create new forms of political and economic organization such as democracy and capitalism, which would eventually produce wealth and destroy aristocracy and other oppressive forms of political leadership.

Although the women of that day were categorically excluded from much of public life in France, some women strongly influenced the philosophes



and their thinking through their participation in the *salon*—an open house held to stimulate discussion and intellectual debate. Salons provided a place for intellectuals and authors to discuss ideas and opinions and for people to engage in witty repartee regarding current events. However, the idea of observing how people lived in order to find out what they thought, and doing so in a systematic manner that could be verified, did not take hold until sweeping political and economic changes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries caused many people to realize that the ideas of some philosophers and theologians no longer seemed relevant. Many of these questions concerned the social upheaval brought about by the age of revolution, particularly the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, and the rapid industrialization and urbanization that occurred first in Britain, then in Western Europe, and later in the United States.

### Sociology and the Age of Revolution, Industrialization, and Urbanization

Several types of revolution that took place in the eighteenth century had a profound influence on the origins of sociology. The Enlightenment produced an *intellectual revolution* in how people thought about social change, progress, and critical thinking. The optimistic views of the philosophes and other social thinkers regarding progress and equal opportunity (at least for some people) became part of the impetus for *political revolutions* and *economic revolutions*, first in America and then in France. The Enlightenment thinkers had emphasized a sense of common purpose and hope for human progress; the French Revolution and its aftermath replaced these ideals with discord and overt conflict (see Schama, 1989; Arendt, 1973).

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, another form of revolution occurred: the *Industrial Revolution*. **Industrialization is the process by which societies are transformed from dependence on agriculture and handmade products to an emphasis on manufacturing and related industries.** This process first occurred during the Industrial Revolution in Britain between 1760 and 1850, and was soon repeated throughout Western Europe. By the mid-nineteenth century, industrialization was well under way in the United States. Massive economic, technological, and social changes occurred as machine technology and the factory system shifted the

economic base of these nations from agriculture to manufacturing. A new social class of industrialists emerged in textiles, iron smelting, and related industries. Many people who had labored on the land were forced to leave their tightly knit rural communities and sacrifice well-defined social relationships to seek employment as factory workers in the emerging cities, which became the centers of industrial work.

Urbanization accompanied modernization and the rapid process of industrialization. **Urbanization is the process by which an increasing proportion of a population lives in cities rather than in rural areas.** Although cities existed long before the Industrial Revolution, the development of the factory system led to a rapid increase in both the number of cities and the size of their populations. People from very diverse backgrounds worked together in the same factory. At the same time, many people shifted from being *producers* to being *consumers*. For example, families living in the cities had to buy food with their wages because they could no longer grow their own crops to consume or to barter for other resources. Similarly, people had to pay rent for their lodging because they could no longer exchange their services for shelter.

These living and working conditions led to the development of new social problems: inadequate housing, crowding, unsanitary conditions, poverty, pollution, and crime. Wages were so low that entire families—including very young children—were forced to work, often under hazardous conditions and with no job security. As these conditions became more visible, a new breed of social thinkers turned their attention to trying to understand why and how society was changing.

● As the Industrial Revolution swept through the United States beginning in the nineteenth century, children being employed in factories became increasingly common. Soon social thinkers began to explore such new social problems brought about by industrialization.

Everett Collection/Newscom



## The Development of Modern Sociology

At the same time that urban problems were growing worse, natural scientists had been using reason, or rational thinking, to discover the laws of physics and the movement of the planets. Social thinkers started to believe that by applying the methods developed by the natural sciences, they might discover the laws of human behavior and apply these laws to solve social problems. Historically, the time was ripe for such thoughts because the Age of Enlightenment had produced a belief in reason and humanity's ability to perfect itself.

### Early Thinkers: A Concern with Social Order and Stability

Early social thinkers—such as Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim—were interested in analyzing social order and stability, and many of their ideas had a dramatic influence on modern sociology.

**Auguste Comte** The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term *sociology* from the Latin *socius* (“social, being with others”) and the Greek *logos* (“study of”) to describe a new science that would engage in the study of society. Even though he never actually conducted sociological research, Comte is considered by some to be the “founder of sociology.” Comte’s theory that societies contain *social*

*statics* (forces for social order and stability) and *social dynamics* (forces for conflict and change) continues to be used in contemporary sociology. He stressed that the methods of the natural sciences should be applied to the objective study of society.

Comte’s philosophy is known as **positivism**—a belief that the world can best be understood through scientific inquiry. Comte believed that objective, bias-free knowledge was attainable only through the use of science rather than religion. However, scientific knowledge was “relative knowledge,” not absolute and final. Comte’s positivism had two dimensions: (1) methodological—the application of scientific knowledge to both physical and social phenomena—and (2) social and political—the use of such knowledge to predict the likely results of different policies so that the best one could be chosen.

The ideas of Comte are deeply embedded in the discipline of sociology. Of particular importance is his idea that the nature of human thinking and knowledge passed through several stages as societies evolved from simple to more complex. Comte described how the idea systems and their corresponding social structural arrangements changed in what he termed the *law of the three stages*: the theological, metaphysical, and scientific (or positivistic) stages. Comte believed that knowledge began in the *theological stage*—explanations were based on religion and the supernatural. Next, knowledge moved to the *metaphysical stage*—explanations were based on abstract philosophical speculation. Finally, knowledge would reach the *scientific or positive stage*—explanations are based on systematic observation, experimentation, comparison, and historical analysis.

Shifts in the forms of knowledge in societies were linked to changes in the structural systems of society. In the theological stage, kinship was the most prominent unit of society; however, in the metaphysical stage, the state became the prominent unit, and control shifted from small groups to the state, military, and law. In the scientific or positive stage, industry became the prominent structural unit in society, and



Auguste Comte (1798–1857) (oil on canvas), Etex, Louis Jules (1910–1889)/Temple de la Religion de l'Humanité, Paris, France/The Bridgeman Art Library International

● Auguste Comte

**industrialization** the process by which societies are transformed from dependence on agriculture and handmade products to an emphasis on manufacturing and related industries.

**urbanization** the process by which an increasing proportion of a population lives in cities rather than in rural areas.

**positivism** a term describing Auguste Comte's belief that the world can best be understood through scientific inquiry.



scientists became the spiritual leaders, replacing in importance the priests and philosophers of the previous stages of knowledge. For Comte, this progression through the three stages constituted the basic law of social dynamics, and, when coupled with the laws of statics (which emphasized social order and stability), the new science of sociology could bring about positive social change.

**Harriet Martineau** Comte's works were made more accessible for a wide variety of scholars through the efforts of the British sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). Until recently, Martineau received no recognition in the field of sociology, partly because she was a woman in a male-dominated discipline and society. Not only did she translate and condense Comte's work, but she was also an active sociologist in her own right. Martineau studied the social customs of Britain and the United States and analyzed the consequences of industrialization and capitalism. In *Society in America* (1962/1837), she examined religion, politics, child rearing, slavery, and immigration in the United States, paying special attention to social distinctions based on class, race, and gender. Her works explore the status of women, children, and “sufferers” (persons who are considered to be criminal, mentally ill, handicapped, poor, or alcoholic).

Based on her reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1794/1797), Martineau advocated racial and gender equality. She was also committed to creating a science of society that would be grounded in empirical observations and widely accessible to people. She argued that sociologists should be impartial in their assessment of society but that it is entirely appropriate to compare the existing state of society with the

principles on which it was founded (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998).

Some scholars believe that Martineau's place in the history of sociology should be as a founding member of this field of study, not just as the translator of Auguste Comte's work (Hoecker-Drysdale, 1992; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998). Others have highlighted her influence in spreading the idea that societal progress could be brought about by the spread of democracy and the growth of industrial capitalism (Polanyi, 1944). Martineau believed that a better society would emerge if women and men were treated equally, enlightened reform occurred, and cooperation existed among people in all social classes (but led by the middle class).

In keeping with the sociological imagination, Martineau not only analyzed large-scale social structures in society, but she also explored how these factors influenced the lives of people, particularly women, children, and those who were marginalized by virtue of being criminal, mentally ill, disabled, poor, or alcoholic (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998). She remained convinced that sociology, the “true science of human nature,” could bring about new knowledge and understanding, enlarging people's capacity to create a just society and live heroic lives (Hoecker-Drysdale, 1992).

**Herbert Spencer** Unlike Comte, who was strongly influenced by the upheavals of the French Revolution, the British social theorist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was born in a more peaceful and optimistic period in his country's history. Spencer's major contribution to sociology was an evolutionary perspective on social order and social change. Although the term *evolution* has various meanings, evolutionary theory should be taken to mean “a theory to explain the mechanisms of organic/social change” (Haines, 1997: 81). According to Spencer's Theory of General Evolution, society, like a biological organism, has various interdependent parts (such as the family, the economy, and the government) that work to ensure the stability and survival of the entire society.

Spencer believed that societies developed through a process of “struggle” (for existence) and “fitness” (for survival), which he referred to as the “survival of the fittest.” Because this phrase is often attributed to Charles Darwin, Spencer's view of society is known as **social Darwinism—the belief that those species of animals, including human beings, best adapted to their environment survive and prosper, whereas those poorly adapted die out.** Spencer equated this process of *natural selection* with progress because only the “fittest” members of society would survive the competition, and the “unfit” would be filtered out of society. Based on this belief, he strongly



Spencer Arnold/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

● Harriet Martineau

opposed any social reform that might interfere with the natural selection process and, thus, damage society by favoring its least-worthy members.

Critics have suggested that many of Spencer's ideas contain serious flaws. For one thing, societies are not the same as biological systems; people are able to create and transform the environment in which they live. Moreover, the notion of the survival of the fittest can easily be used to justify class, racial-ethnic, and gender inequalities and to rationalize the lack of action to eliminate harmful practices that contribute to such inequalities. Not surprisingly, Spencer's "hands-off" view was applauded by many wealthy industrialists of his day. John D. Rockefeller, who gained monopolistic control of much of the U.S. oil industry early in the twentieth century, maintained that the growth of giant businesses was merely the "survival of the fittest" (Feagin, Baker, and Feagin, 2006).

Social Darwinism served as a rationalization for some people's assertion of the superiority of the white race. After the Civil War, it was used to justify the repression and neglect of African Americans as well as the policies that resulted in the annihilation of Native American populations. Although some social reformers spoke out against these justifications, "scientific" racism continued to exist (Turner,

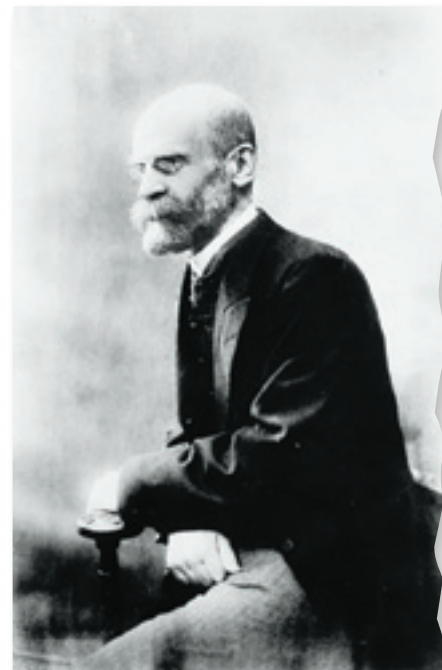
Singleton, and Musick, 1984). In both positive and negative ways, many of Spencer's ideas and concepts have been deeply embedded in social thinking and public policy for more than a century.

**Emile Durkheim** French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was an avowed critic of some of Spencer's views while incorporating others into his own writing. Durkheim stressed that people are the product of their social environment and that behavior cannot be fully understood in terms of *individual* biological and psychological traits. He believed that the limits of human potential are *socially* based, not *biologically* based. As Durkheim saw religious traditions evaporating in his society, he searched for a scientific, rational way to provide for societal integration and stability (Hadden, 1997).

In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1964a/1895), Durkheim set forth one of his most important contributions to sociology: the idea that societies are built on social facts. **Social facts are patterned ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside any one**



● Herbert Spencer



● Emile Durkheim

**social Darwinism** Herbert Spencer's belief that those species of animals, including human beings, best adapted to their environment survive and prosper, whereas those poorly adapted die out.

**social facts** Emile Durkheim's term for patterned ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist *outside* any one individual but that exert social control over each person.



**individual but that exert social control over each person.** Durkheim believed that social facts must be explained by other social facts—by reference to the social structure rather than to individual attributes.

Durkheim was concerned with social order and social stability because he lived during the period of rapid social changes in Europe resulting from industrialization and urbanization. His recurring question was this: How do societies manage to hold together? In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933/1893), Durkheim concluded that preindustrial societies were held together by strong traditions and by members' shared moral beliefs and values. As societies industrialized, more-specialized economic activity became the basis of the social bond because people became dependent on one another.

Durkheim observed that rapid social change and a more specialized division of labor produce *strains* in society. These strains lead to a breakdown in traditional organization, values, and authority and to a dramatic increase in ***anomie***—**a condition in which social control becomes ineffective as a result of the loss of shared values and of a sense of purpose in society.** According to Durkheim, anomie is most likely to occur during a period of rapid social change. In *Suicide* (1964b/1897) he explored the relationship between anomic social conditions and suicide, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Durkheim's contributions to sociology are so significant that he has been referred to as “the crucial figure in the development of sociology as an academic discipline [and as] one of the deepest roots of the sociological imagination” (Tiryakian, 1978: 187). He has long been viewed as a proponent of the scientific approach to examining social facts that lie outside individuals. He is also described as the founding figure of the functionalist theoretical tradition. Recently, scholars have acknowledged Durkheim's influence on contemporary social theory, including the structuralist and postmodernist schools of thought. Like Comte, Martineau, and Spencer, Durkheim emphasized that sociology should be a science based on observation and the systematic study of social facts rather than on individual characteristics or traits.

Can Durkheim's ideas be applied to our ongoing analysis of consumerism and credit cards? Durkheim was interested in examining the “social glue” that could hold contemporary societies together and provide people with a “sense of belonging.” Ironically, shopping and the credit card industry have created what we might call a “pseudo-sense of belonging” through “membership” in Sam's Club-like businesses and the creation of affinity credit cards designed to encourage members of an organization (such as a fraternity or university

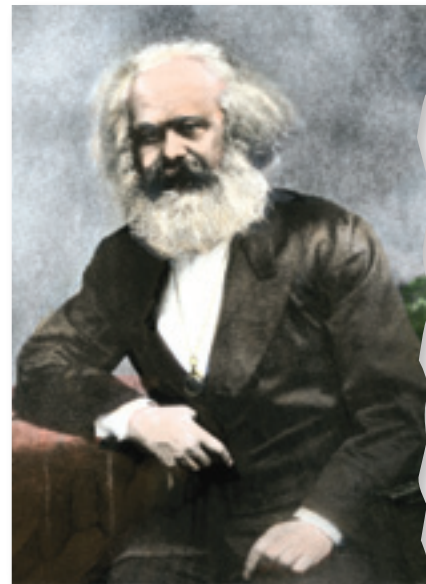
alumni association) or people who share interests and activities (such as dog owners and skydiving enthusiasts) to possess a particular card. In later chapters we examine Durkheim's theoretical contributions to diverse subjects ranging from suicide and deviance to education and religion.

## Differing Views on the Status Quo: Stability versus Change

Together with Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, Durkheim established the course for modern sociology. We will look first at Marx's and **LO6** Weber's divergent thoughts about conflict and social change in societies, and then at Simmel's analysis of society.

**Karl Marx** In sharp contrast to Durkheim's focus on the stability of society, German economist and philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) stressed that history is a continuous clash between conflicting ideas and forces. He believed that conflict—especially class conflict—is necessary in order to produce social change and a better society. For Marx, the most important changes were economic. He concluded that the capitalist economic system was responsible for the overwhelming poverty that he observed in London at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Marx and Engels, 1967/1848).

In the Marxian framework, *class conflict* is the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class. The capitalist class, or *bourgeoisie*, comprises those who own and control the means of production—the tools, land, factories, and money for investment that form the economic basis of a society. The working class, or *proletariat*, is composed of



● Karl Marx

North Wind/North Wind Picture Archives

# Sociology WORKS!

## Ahead of His Time: Marx, Alienation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement

**S**ocial thinkers have long been fascinated by alienation. This concept is often attributed to the economist and philosopher Karl Marx. As further discussed in Chapter 8, *alienation* is a term used to refer to an individual's feeling of *powerlessness* and *estrangement* from other people and from oneself. Marx specifically linked alienation to social relations that are inherent in capitalism; however, more-recent social thinkers have expanded his ideas to include social psychological feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and isolation. These may be present because people experience social injustice and vast economic inequalities in contemporary societies. Other analysts believe that rampant consumerism may also be linked to alienation because people spend more than they can afford in hopes of finding happiness, gaining the approval of others, or elevating their social status in society.

How are these concepts of alienation and powerlessness reflected in today's global society? One example can be seen in the recent Occupy Wall Street movement. Jeffrey D. Sachs (2012), an economist and the director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York City, states that the emergence of global capitalism has fostered large economic disparities and other contradictions in society, which have



● How are concepts of alienation and powerlessness reflected in the recent Occupy Wall Street movement?

contributed to social activism such as Occupy Wall Street and similar protests. According to Sachs (2012), four factors have contributed to such social unrest:

1. chronic high unemployment rates, especially for young people;
2. high tuition that has put education beyond the reach of many young people;
3. political leaders and governments that do not address the needs and problems of individuals and groups that have been left behind by globalization; and
4. the collapse of the financial bubble that was brought about by a combination of "lax monetary policies, financial deregulation, and flagrant corruption within leading financial companies."

From this perspective, the Occupy Wall Street protesters were an outward indication of the inner frustrations that people were feeling about inadequate political and economic policies and practice. In other words, the protestors were voicing the Marxian concept of alienation that they were individually and collectively feeling.

How do we apply these concepts to better understand our society? For one, we can view pressing social issues as important problems that we must all work together to solve. For many this might mean that we come together to talk about how we might solve problems rather than continuing to live in our own isolated social worlds, where many individuals feel alienated from others.

### reflect & analyze

Why are we often more concerned about trivial matters, such as who will be the big winner in a sporting event or on a reality TV show, than we are about how to address our most pressing social and economic concerns? What examples can you provide to show that Marx's concept of alienation may still apply to twenty-first-century life?

those who must sell their labor because they have no other means to earn a livelihood. From Marx's viewpoint, the capitalist class controls and exploits the masses of struggling workers by paying less than the value of their labor. This exploitation results in workers' *alienation*—a feeling of powerlessness and estrangement from other people and from themselves (see a contemporary discussion of alienation based on Marx's perspective in "Sociology Works!").

Marx predicted that the working class would become aware of its exploitation, overthrow the capitalists, and establish a free and classless society.

**anomie** Emile Durkheim's designation for a condition in which social control becomes ineffective as a result of the loss of shared values and of a sense of purpose in society.

# Not For Sale



Can Marx provide useful insights on the means of consumption? Although Marx primarily analyzed the process of production, he linked production and consumption in his definition of *commodities* as products that workers produce. Marx believed that commodities have a use value and an exchange value. *Use value* refers to objects that people produce to meet their personal needs or the needs of those in their immediate surroundings. By contrast, *exchange value* refers to the value that a commodity has when it is exchanged for money in the open market. In turn, this money is used to acquire other use values, and the cycle continues. According to Marx, commodities play a central role in capitalism, but the workers who give value to the commodities eventually fail to see this fact. Marx coined the phrase the *fetishism of commodities* to describe the situation in which workers fail to recognize that their labor gives the commodity its value and instead come to believe that a commodity's value is based on the natural properties of the thing itself. By extending Marx's idea in this regard, we might conclude that the workers did not rebel against capitalism for several reasons: (1) they falsely believed that what capitalists did was in their own best interests as well, (2) they believed that the products they produced had a value in the marketplace that was independent of anything the workers did, and (3) they came to view ownership of the commodities as a desirable end in itself and to work longer hours so that they could afford to purchase more goods and services.

Although Marx's ideas on exploitation of workers cannot be fully developed into a theory of consumer exploitation, it has been argued that a form of exploitation does occur when capitalists "devote increasing attention to getting consumers to buy more goods and services" (Ritzer, 1995: 19). The primary ways by which capitalists can increase their profits are cutting costs and selling more products. To encourage continual increases in spending (and thus profits), capitalists have created mega-shopping malls, cable television shopping networks, and online shopping that encourages consumers to purchase more items and increase their credit card debt. In the meanwhile, new questions arise about issues such as Internet privacy (see "Sociology and Social Policy").

Marx's theories provide a springboard for neo-Marxist analysts and other scholars to examine the economic, political, and social relations embedded in production and consumption in historical and contemporary societies. But what is Marx's place in the history of sociology? Marx is regarded as one of the most profound sociological thinkers, one who combined ideas derived from philosophy, history, and the social sciences into a new theoretical

configuration. However, his social and economic analyses have also inspired heated debates among generations of social scientists. Central to his view was the belief that society should not just be studied but should also be changed because the *status quo* (the existing state of society) involved the oppression of most of the population by a small group of wealthy people. Those who believe that sociology should be value free are uncomfortable with Marx's advocacy of what some perceive to be radical social change. Throughout this text, we will continue to explore Marx's various contributions to sociological thinking.

**Max Weber** German social scientist Max Weber (pronounced VAY-ber) (1864–1920) was also concerned about the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Although he disagreed with Marx's idea that economics is *the* central force in social change, Weber acknowledged that economic interests are important in shaping human action. Even so, he thought that economic systems are heavily influenced by other factors, such as religion, in a society. As we will see in Chapter 17 ("Religion"), one of Weber's most important works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976/1904–1905), evaluated the role of the Protestant Reformation in producing a social climate in which capitalism could exist and flourish.

Unlike many early analysts, who believed that values could not be separated from the research process, Weber emphasized that sociology should be *value free*—research should be conducted in a scientific manner and should exclude the researcher's personal values and economic interests (Turner,



● Max Weber

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

# SOCIOLOGY and Social Policy

## Online Shopping and Your Privacy

Motorcycle jacket for kid brother on the Internet—\$300  
Monogrammed golf balls for dad on the Internet—\$50  
Vintage smoking robe for husband on the Internet—\$80  
Not having to hear “attention shoppers”—not even once—  
priceless.

The way to pay on the Internet and everywhere else you  
see the MasterCard logo: MasterCard.

—MasterCard advertisement (qtd. in Manning, 2000: 114)

**C**learly, this older advertisement for MasterCard taps into a vital source of revenue for companies that issue credit cards: online customers. Earlier, we mentioned that industrialization and urbanization were important historical factors that brought about significant changes in social life. Today, social life has changed even more as the Internet has become an integral part of daily life, including how we gather information, communicate with others, go shopping, and think about our privacy.

Shopping online raises important questions: Who is watching your online activity? How far do companies go in “snooping” on those who visit their websites? Companies



● Do you feel comfortable shopping online? Do you care if retailers use your private information for their own purposes? Why or why not?

that sell products or services on the Internet are not required to respect the privacy of shoppers. According to the American Bar Association (2010), “This means the seller may collect data on which site pages you visit, which products you buy, when you buy them, and where you ship them. Then, the seller may share the information with other companies or sell it to them.” Some websites have privacy policies but still insert cookies, data stored on a user’s computer that tell the site’s owner where you go and what you do on the site. Sometimes, the site owner records your e-mail address and begins sending you e-mail messages about that company’s products, whether you have asked to receive them or not. It is possible, but often not easy, to “unsubscribe” from these mailings.

To offset people’s fears of invasion of privacy or abuse of their credit card information, corporations reassure customers that they are not being tracked and that it is safe to give out personal information online. However, the American Bar Association (ABA) advises caution in Internet interactions. According to the ABA, consumers using a credit card for an online purchase should ask whether their credit card number will be kept on file by the seller for automatic use in future orders. Online shoppers should also find out what information the seller is gathering about them, how the seller will use this information, and whether they can “opt out” of having this information gathered (American Bar Association, 2010). If you think that you are being “watched” when you browse or make purchases online, you probably are!

### reflect & analyze

Are you responsible for protecting your own privacy online, or should federal law require that companies obtaining information about you must let you know exactly what data they are collecting and why? How can our study of sociology make us more aware of key social policy issues—such as this—that affect our everyday life?

Sources: Based on American Bar Association, 2010.

Beeghley, and Powers, 2002). However, Weber realized that social behavior cannot be analyzed by the objective criteria that we use to measure such things as temperature or weight, so sociologists cannot be totally value free. He stressed that sociologists should employ *verstehen* (German for “understanding” or “insight”) to gain the ability to see the world as others see it. In contemporary sociology this idea is incorporated into the concept of the sociological imagination (discussed earlier in this chapter).

Weber was also concerned that large-scale organizations (bureaucracies) were becoming increasingly oriented toward routine administration and a specialized division of labor, which he believed were destructive to human vitality and freedom. According to Weber, rational bureaucracy, rather than class struggle, was the most significant factor in determining the social relations among people in industrial societies because bureaucratic domination can be used to maintain powerful interests

# Not For Sale

in society. As discussed in Chapter 6 (“Groups and Organizations”), Weber’s work on bureaucracy has had a far-reaching impact.






What might Weber’s work contribute to a contemporary study of consumerism and the credit card industry? One of Weber’s most useful concepts is *rationalization*: “the process by which the modern world has come to be increasingly dominated by structures devoted to efficiency, calculability, predictability, and technological control” (Ritzer, 1995: 21). According to Ritzer, the credit card industry has contributed to the rationalization process by the *efficiency* with which it makes loans and deals with consumers. Prior to the introduction of credit cards, the process of obtaining a loan was slow and cumbersome. Today, the process of obtaining a credit card is highly efficient. It may take only minutes from the time a brief questionnaire is filled out until credit records are checked by computer and the application is approved or disapproved. *Calculability* is demonstrated by scorecards that allow lenders to score potential borrowers based on prior statistics of other people’s performance in paying their bills (see ● Figure 1.2). The *predictability* of credit cards means that if the cardholder is current on paying bills and the merchant accepts that kind of card, the

cardholder will not be turned down on a purchase. Finally, the use of *technological control* is apparent in the credit card industry. These technologies range from the computerized system that determines whether a new credit card will be issued to cards embedded with computer chips, ATM machines, and online systems that permit instantaneous transfers of funds. As Ritzer’s application of the concept of rationalization to the credit card industry shows, Weber’s ideas remain a starting point for contemporary theories and research.

Weber made significant contributions to sociology by emphasizing value-free inquiry and understanding how others see the world. He also provided important insights on the process of rationalization, bureaucracy, religion, and many other topics. In his writings Weber was more aware of women’s issues than were many of the scholars of his day, perhaps because his wife, Marianne Weber, was an important figure in Germany’s women’s movement early in the twentieth century (Roth, 1988).

**Georg Simmel** At about the same time that Durkheim was developing the field of sociology in France, the German sociologist Georg Simmel (pronounced ZIM-mel) (1858–1918) was theorizing

**The more points you score, the more likely you are to receive credit, and a higher score may also result in your being charged lower interest rates on loans. The total score runs from 300 to 850, and most people will have a score between 600 and 800. Fifteen percent of the population will score below that range, and thirteen percent will score 800 or above. Here are the factors that go into your score:**

Score	
 Bill payment history (35 percent of the total score), especially recently. Consistently paying your bills on time raises your score; being behind lowers it. Having an account sent to collections is bad. Filing bankruptcy <i>really</i> lowers your score.	
 Amount you owe and available credit (30 percent of total score). This includes money owed on credit cards, car loans, mortgages, and other debt as compared with the total amount of credit you have available.	
 Length of credit history (15 percent of total score). The longer you've had credit, the higher your score in this category.	
 Types of credit in use (10 percent of total score). A person with both revolving credit (such as credit cards) and installment credit (such as car loans and mortgages) will have a higher score in this category.	
 New credit/Recent applications for credit (10 percent of total score). It doesn't hurt to shop several sources for the best interest rates, but if you are delinquent in paying your bills, applying for new credit from other sources may look like you are fighting off bankruptcy.	
Total Score:	

● **FIGURE 1.2** TYPICAL CREDIT REPORT “SCORECARD”

Source: Based on [www.myFICO.com](http://www.myFICO.com), 2012.



about society as a web of patterned interactions among people. The main purpose of sociology, according to Simmel, is to examine social interaction processes within groups. In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (1950/1902–1917), he analyzed how group size influences social interactions and concluded that interaction patterns differ between a *dyad*, a social group with two members, and a *triad*, a social group with three members. He developed *formal sociology*, an approach that calls attention to the universal recurring social forms underlying the varying content of social interaction. Simmel referred to these forms as the “geometry of social life.” He also distinguished between the *forms* of social interaction (such as cooperation or conflict) and the *content* of interaction in different social contexts (for example, between leaders and followers).

Like the other social thinkers of his day, Simmel analyzed the impact of industrialization and urbanization on people’s lives and concluded that class conflict was becoming more pronounced in modern industrial societies. He also predicted an increase in individualism as opposed to concern for the group, to the fact that people now had many cross-cutting “social spheres”—membership in a number of organizations and voluntary associations—rather than sharing the singular community ties of the past. Simmel also assessed the costs of “progress” on the upper-class city dweller, who, he believed, had to develop certain techniques to survive overstimulation in the city, including its crowding, noise, and impersonality. His ultimate concern was to protect the autonomy of the individual in society.



● Georg Simmel

In *The Philosophy of Money* (1990/1907) Simmel sheds light on consumerism when he stresses that money takes on a life of its own as people come to see money and the things that it can purchase as an end in themselves. Eventually, everything (and everybody) is seen as having a price, and people become blasé, losing the ability to differentiate between what is really of value and what is not. If money increases imprudence in consumption, credit cards afford even greater opportunities for people to spend money they do not have for things they do not need and, in the process, to sink deeper into debt (Ritzer, 1995). Simmel’s perspective on money is only one of many possible examples of how his writings provide insights into social life. Simmel’s contributions to sociology are significant. He wrote more than thirty books and numerous essays on diverse topics, leading some critics to state that his work was fragmentary and piecemeal. However, his thinking has influenced a wide array of sociologists, including the members of the “Chicago School” in the United States.

## The Beginnings of Sociology in the United States

From Western Europe, sociology spread in the 1890s to the United States, where it thrived as a result of the intellectual climate and the rapid rate of social change. The first departments of sociology in the United States were located at the University of Chicago and at Atlanta University, then an African American school.

**The Chicago School** The first department of sociology in the United States was established at the University of Chicago, where the faculty was instrumental in starting the American Sociological Society (now known as the American Sociological Association). Robert E. Park (1864–1944), a member of the Chicago faculty, asserted that urbanization had a disintegrating influence on social life by producing an increase in the crime rate and in racial and class antagonisms that contributed to the segregation and isolation of neighborhoods (Ross, 1991). George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), another member of the faculty at Chicago, founded the symbolic interaction perspective, which is discussed later in this chapter. Mead made many significant contributions to sociology. Among these were his emphasis on the importance of studying the group (“the social”) rather than starting with separate individuals. Mead also called our attention to the importance of shared communication among people based on language and gestures. As discussed in Chapter 4 (“Socialization”), Mead gave us important insights on how we develop our self-concept through interaction with those persons who are the most significant influences in our lives.



AP Photo

● Jane Addams

**Jane Addams** Jane Addams (1860–1935) is one of the best-known early women sociologists in the United States because she founded Hull House, one of the most famous settlement houses, in an impoverished area of Chicago. Throughout her career, she was actively engaged in sociological endeavors: She lectured at numerous colleges, was a charter member of the American Sociological Society, and published a number of articles and books. Addams was one of the authors of *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, a groundbreaking book that used a methodological technique employed by sociologists for the next forty years (Deegan, 1988). She was also awarded a Nobel Prize for her assistance to the underprivileged.

### W. E. B. Du Bois and Atlanta University

The second department of sociology in the United States was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) at Atlanta University. He created a laboratory of sociology, instituted a program of systematic research, founded and conducted regular sociological conferences on research, founded two journals, and established a record of valuable publications. His classic work, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899), was based on his research into Philadelphia's African American community and stressed the strengths and weaknesses of a community wrestling with overwhelming social problems. Du Bois was one of the first scholars to note that a dual heritage creates conflict for people of color. He called this duality *double-consciousness*—the identity conflict of being both a black and an American. Du Bois pointed out that although people in this country espouse such values as democracy, freedom, and equality, they also accept racism and group discrimination. African Americans are the victims of these conflicting values and the actions that result from them (Benjamin, 1991).



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● W. E. B. Du Bois

## Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives

Given the many and varied ideas and trends that influenced the development of sociology, how do contemporary sociologists view society? Some see it as basically a stable and ongoing entity; others view it in terms of many groups competing for scarce resources; still others describe it based on the everyday, routine interactions among individuals. Each of these views represents a method of examining the same phenomena. Each is based on general ideas about how social life is organized and represents an effort to link specific observations in a meaningful way. Each uses a **theory**—a set of logically interrelated statements that attempts to describe, explain, and (occasionally) predict social events. Each theory helps interpret reality in a distinct way by providing a framework in which observations may be logically ordered. Sociologists refer to this theoretical framework as a *perspective*—an overall approach to or viewpoint on some subject.

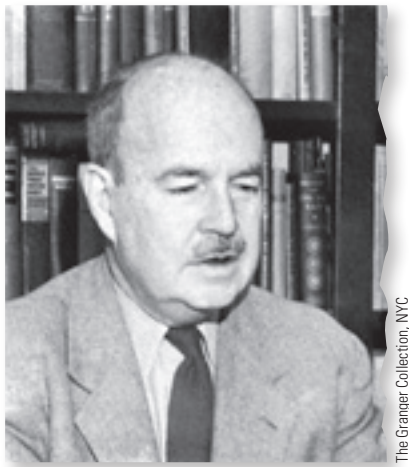
Three major theoretical perspectives have emerged in sociology: the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives. Other perspectives, such as postmodernism, have emerged and gained acceptance among some social thinkers more recently. Before turning to the specifics of these perspectives, however, we should note that some theorists and theories do not neatly fit into any of these perspectives.

## Functionalist Perspectives

Also known as *functionalism* and *structural functionalism*, **functionalist perspectives are based on the assumption that society is a stable, orderly system.** This stable system is characterized by *societal consensus*, whereby the majority of members share a common set of values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations. According to this perspective, a society is composed of interrelated parts, each of which serves a function and (ideally) contributes to the overall stability of the society. Societies develop social structures, or institutions, that persist because they play a part in helping society survive. These institutions include the family, education, government, religion, and the economy. If anything adverse happens to one of these institutions or parts, all other parts are affected and the system no longer functions properly. As Durkheim noted, rapid social change and a more specialized division of labor produce *strains* in society that lead to a breakdown in these traditional institutions and may result in social problems such as an increase in crime and suicide rates.

### Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), perhaps the most influential contemporary advocate of the functionalist perspective, stressed that all societies must provide for meeting social needs in order to survive. Parsons (1955) suggested, for example, that a division of labor (distinct, specialized functions) between husband and wife is essential for family stability and social order. The husband/father performs the *instrumental tasks*, which involve leadership and decision-making responsibilities in the home and employment outside the home to support the family. The wife/mother is responsible for the *expressive tasks*, including housework, caring for the children, and providing emotional support for the entire family. Parsons believed



The Granger Collection, NYC

● Talcott Parsons



Pictorial Parade/Archive Photos/Getty Images

● Robert K. Merton

that other institutions, including school, church, and government, must function to assist the family and that all institutions must work together to preserve the system over time (Parsons, 1955).

Functionalism was refined further by Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), who distinguished between manifest and latent functions of social institutions. **Manifest functions are intended and/or overtly recognized by the participants in a social unit.** In contrast, **latent functions are unintended functions that are hidden and remain unacknowledged by participants.** For example, a manifest function of education is the transmission of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next; a latent function is the establishment of social relations and networks. Merton noted that all features of a social system may not be functional at all times; *dysfunctions* are the undesirable consequences of any element of a society. A dysfunction of education in the United States is the perpetuation of gender, racial-ethnic, and class inequalities. Such dysfunctions may threaten the capacity of a society to adapt and survive (Merton, 1968).

**theory** a set of logically interrelated statements that attempts to describe, explain, and (occasionally) predict social events.

**functionalist perspectives** the sociological approach that views society as a stable, orderly system.

**manifest functions** functions that are intended and/or overtly recognized by the participants in a social unit.

**latent functions** unintended functions that are hidden and remain unacknowledged by participants.





St Petersburg Times/ZUMA/PRESS/Newscom

● Shopping malls are a reflection of a consumer society. A manifest function of a shopping mall is to sell goods and services to shoppers; however, a latent function may be to provide a communal area in which people can visit friends and enjoy an event.

## Applying a Functional Perspective to Shopping and Consumption

How might functionalists analyze shopping and consumption? When we examine the part-to-whole relationships of contemporary society in high-income nations, it immediately becomes apparent that each social institution depends on the others for its well-being. For example, a booming economy benefits other social institutions, including the family (members are gainfully employed), religion (churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples receive larger contributions), and education (school taxes are higher when property values are higher). A strong economy also makes it possible for more people to purchase more goods and services. By contrast, a weak economy has a negative influence on people's opportunities and spending patterns. Because of the significance of the economy in other aspects of social life, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts surveys (for the Bureau of Labor Statistics) to determine how people are spending their money (see "Census Profiles"). If people have "extra" money to spend and can afford leisure time away from work, they are more likely to dine out, take trips, and purchase things they might otherwise forgo. However, in difficult economic times,

people are more likely to curtail family outings and some purchases.

Clearly, a manifest function of shopping and consumption is purchasing necessary items such as food, clothing, household items, and sometimes transportation. But what are the latent functions of shopping? Consider, shopping malls, for example: Many young people go to the mall to "hang out," visit with friends, and eat lunch at the food court. People of all ages go shopping for pleasure, relaxation, and perhaps to enhance their feelings of self-worth. ("If I buy this product, I'll look younger/beautiful/handsome/sexy, etc.!") However, shopping and consuming may also produce problems or dysfunctions. Some people are "shopaholics" or "credit card junkies" who cannot stop spending money; others are kleptomaniacs, who steal products rather than pay for them.

The functionalist perspective is useful in analyzing consumerism because of the way in which it examines the relationship between part-to-whole relationships. How the economy is doing affects individuals' consumption patterns, and when the economy is not doing well, political leaders often encourage us to spend more to help the national economy and keep other people employed.

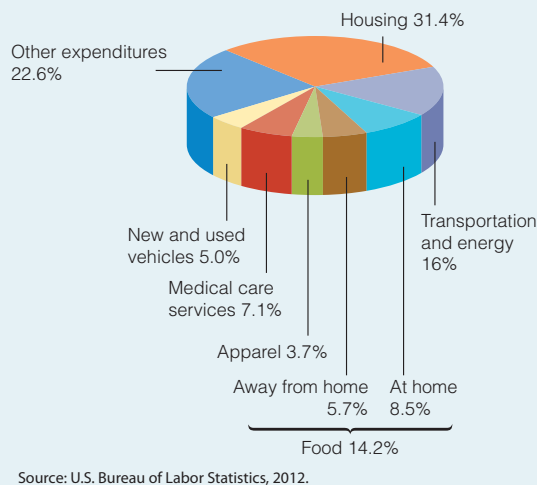
# census PROFILES

## Consumer Spending

The U.S. Census Bureau provides a wealth of data that helps sociologists and other researchers answer questions about the characteristics of the U.S. population. Although the decennial census occurs only once every ten years, the Census Bureau conducts surveys and produces reports on many topics throughout every year. For example, the Census Bureau conducts surveys that the Bureau of Labor Statistics uses to compute the Consumer Price Index, which is a measure of the average change over time in the prices paid by urban consumers for consumer goods and services. This index is used to measure how the nation's economy is performing.

The Consumer Price Index is based on a survey of 7,500 randomly selected households in which people keep a diary of all expenditures they make over a period of time and record whether those expenditures occur on a regular basis (such as for food or rent) or involve relatively large purchases (such as a house or a car). The Census Bureau also conducts interviews to obtain additional data about people's expenditures.

According to the most recent survey, here is the distribution of how we spend our money on an annual basis:



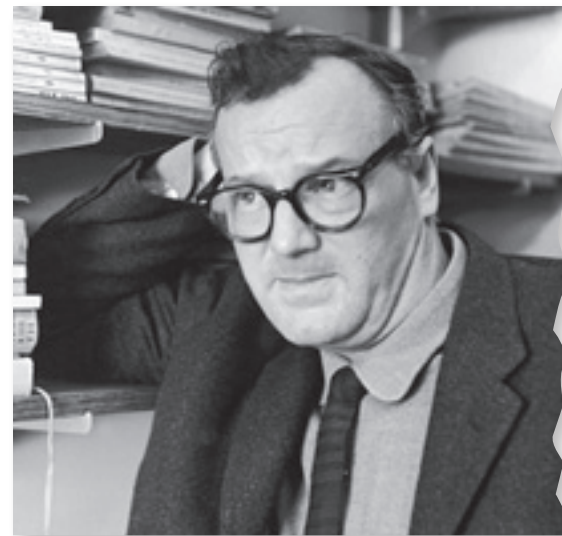
## Conflict Perspectives

According to *conflict perspectives*, groups in society are engaged in a continuous power struggle for control of scarce resources. Conflict may take the form of politics, litigation, negotiations, or family discussions about financial matters. Simmel, Marx, and Weber contributed significantly to this perspective by focusing on

the inevitability of clashes between social groups. Today, advocates of the conflict perspective view social life as a continuous power struggle among competing social groups.

**Max Weber and C. Wright Mills** As previously discussed, Karl Marx focused on the exploitation and oppression of the proletariat (the workers) by the bourgeoisie (the owners or capitalist class). Max Weber recognized the importance of economic conditions in producing inequality and conflict in society but added *power* and *prestige* as other sources of inequality. Weber (1968/1922) defined *power* as the ability of a person within a social relationship to carry out his or her own will despite resistance from others, and *prestige* as a positive or negative social estimation of honor (Weber, 1968/1922).

C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), a key figure in the development of contemporary conflict theory, encouraged sociologists to get involved in social reform. Mills encouraged everyone to look beneath everyday events in order to observe the major resource and power inequalities that exist in society. He believed that the most important decisions in the United States are made largely behind the scenes by the *power elite*—a small clique composed of the top corporate, political, and military officials. Mills's power elite theory is discussed in Chapter 14 ("Politics and Government in Global Perspective").



● C. Wright Mills

**conflict perspectives** the sociological approach that views groups in society as engaged in a continuous power struggle for control of scarce resources.





David R. Frazier Photolibrary, Inc./Alamy

● The \$85 million Spelling Manor in Los Angeles—with its 14 bedrooms, 27 bathrooms, and bowling alley—is an example of conspicuous consumption. What examples of conspicuous consumption do you see in your community?

The conflict perspective is not one unified theory but rather encompasses several branches. One branch is the neo-Marxist approach, which views struggle between the classes as inevitable and as a prime source of social change. A second branch focuses on racial-ethnic inequalities and the continued exploitation of members of some racial-ethnic groups. A third branch is the feminist perspective, which focuses on gender issues.

**The Feminist Approach** A feminist approach (or “feminism”) directs attention to women’s experiences and the importance of gender as an element of social structure. This approach is based on the belief that “women and men are equal and should be equally valued as well as have equal rights” (Basow, 1992). According to feminist theorists, we live in a *patriarchy*, a system in which men dominate women and in which things that are considered to be “male” or “masculine” are more highly valued than those considered to be “female” or “feminine.” The feminist perspective assumes that gender is socially created, rather than determined by one’s biological inheritance, and that change is essential in order for people to achieve their human potential without limits based on gender. Some feminists argue that women’s subordination can end only after the patriarchal system becomes obsolete. However, note that feminism is not one single, unified approach. Rather, there are several feminist perspectives, which are discussed in Chapter 11 (“Sex, Gender, and Sexuality”).

**Applying Conflict Perspectives to Shopping and Consumption** How might advocates of a conflict approach analyze the process of shopping and consumption? A contemporary conflict analysis of consumption might look at how inequalities based on racism, sexism, and

income differentials affect people’s ability to acquire the things they need and want. It might also look at inequalities regarding the issuance of credit cards and access to “cathedrals of consumption” such as mega-shopping malls and tourist resorts (see Ritzer, 1999: 197–214).

However, one of the earliest social theorists to discuss the relationship between social class and consumption patterns was the U.S. social scientist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929). In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1967/1899), Veblen described early wealthy U.S. industrialists as engaging in *conspicuous consumption*—the continuous public display of one’s wealth and status through purchases such as expensive houses, clothing, motor vehicles, and other consumer goods. According to Veblen, the leisurely lifestyle of the upper classes typically does not provide them with adequate opportunities to show off their wealth and status. In order to attract public admiration, the wealthy often engage in consumption and leisure activities that are both highly visible and highly wasteful. Examples of conspicuous consumption range from Cornelius Vanderbilt’s 8 lavish mansions and 10 major summer estates in the Gilded Age to the contemporary \$85 million Spelling Manor in Los Angeles, which has 56,500 square feet, 14 bedrooms, 27 bathrooms, and a two-lane bowling alley, among many other luxurious amenities. By contrast, however, some of today’s wealthiest people engage in *inconspicuous consumption*, perhaps to maintain a low public profile or out of fear for their own safety or that of other family members.

Conspicuous consumption has become more widely acceptable at all income levels, and many families live on credit in order to purchase the goods and services that they would like to have. According to conflict theorists, the economic gains of the wealthiest people are often at the expense of those in the lower classes, who may have to struggle (sometimes unsuccessfully) to have adequate food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and their children. Chapter 8 (“Class and Stratification in the United States”) and Chapter 9 (“Global Stratification”) discuss contemporary conflict perspectives on class-based inequalities.

However, some people reject the idea of overconsumption and decide not to overspend, instead seeking to make changes in their lives and encouraging others to do likewise (see “You Can Make a Difference”).

## Symbolic Interactionist Perspectives

The conflict and functionalist perspectives have been criticized for focusing primarily on macrolevel analysis. A



# YOU can make a difference

## Thinking Less About Things and More About People

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, militarism and economic exploitation are incapable of being conquered.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 1967 (qtd. in Postman, 2011)

**M**ore than forty years ago, Dr. King encouraged people to find fulfillment in social relationships with other people rather than in new technologies or in making more money. Since King's era, the United States has had periods of economic boom and bust, accompanied by unparalleled consumerism. Many analysts believe that consumerism and constant pressures to "buy, buy, buy more!" have created financial havoc for many individuals and families. We are continually surrounded by advertisements, shopping malls, and online buying opportunities that set in front of us a veritable banquet of merchandise to buy. However, shopping that gets out of hand is a serious habit that may have lasting psychological and economic consequences. If we are aware of these problems, we may be able to help ourselves or others avoid hyperconsumerism.

Do you know the symptoms of compulsive overspending and debt dependency? Consider these questions:

- Do you or someone you know spend large amounts of time shopping or thinking about going shopping?
- Do you or someone you know rush to the store or to the computer for online shopping when feeling frustrated, depressed, or otherwise "out of sorts"?



Jim West/AGE Fotostock/Rights Managed

● These students are spending a day of service, helping to build a home. Many colleges and universities have similar service days to help their communities. What projects could you and your peers undertake?

- Do you or someone you know routinely argue with parents, friends, or partners about spending too much money or overcharging on credit cards?
- Do you or someone you know hide purchases or make dishonest statements—such as "It was a gift from a friend"—to explain where new merchandise came from?

According to economist Juliet Schor (1999), who has extensively studied the problems associated with excessive spending and credit card debt, each of us can empower ourselves and help others as well if we follow simple steps in our consumer behavior. Among these steps are *controlling desire* by gaining knowledge of the process of consumption and its effect on people, *helping to make exclusivity uncool* by demystifying the belief that people are "better" simply because they own excessively expensive items, and *discouraging competitive consumption* by encouraging our friends and acquaintances to spend less on presents and other purchases. Finally, Schor suggests that we should *become educated consumers* and *avoid use of shopping as a form of therapy*. By following Schor's simple steps and encouraging our friends and relatives to do likewise, we may be able to free ourselves from the demands of a hyperconsumer society that continually bombards us with messages indicating that we should spend more and go deeper in debt on our credit cards.

How might we think more about people? Some analysts suggest that we should make a list of things that are more important to us than money and material possessions. These might include our *relationships* and *experiences* with family, friends, and others whom we encounter in daily life. Are we so engrossed in our own life that we fail to take others into account? Around school, are we so busy texting or talking on our cell phone that we fail to speak to others? During holidays and special occasions, do we make time for friends and loved ones even if we think we have "better" things to do?

Other suggestions for thinking about others might include *looking for ways, small and large, to help others*. Small ways to help others might be opening a door for someone whose hands are full, letting someone go before us in a line or while driving in traffic, or any one of a million small kindnesses that might brighten someone else's day as well as our own. Large ways of helping others would include joining voluntary organizations that assist people in the community, including older individuals, persons with health problems, children who need a tutor or mentor, or many others you might learn of from school organizations, social service agencies, or churches in your area. Are you up to the challenge? Many who have tried thinking less about things and more about people highly recommend this as a life-affirming endeavor for all involved.

Source: Schor, 1999.

**macrolevel analysis** examines whole societies, large-scale social structures, and social systems instead of looking at important social dynamics in individuals' lives. Our third perspective, symbolic interactionism, fills this void by examining people's day-to-day interactions and their behavior in groups. Thus, symbolic interactionist approaches are based on a **microlevel analysis, which focuses on small groups rather than on large-scale social structures.**

We can trace the origins of this perspective to the Chicago School, especially George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer (1900–1986), who is credited with coining the term *symbolic interactionism*. According to **symbolic interactionist perspectives, society is the sum of the interactions of individuals and groups.** Theorists using this perspective focus on the process of *interaction*—defined as immediate reciprocally oriented communication between two or more people—and the part that *symbols* play in giving meaning to human communication. A *symbol* is anything that meaningfully represents something else. Examples of symbols include signs, gestures, written language, and shared values. Symbolic interaction occurs when people communicate through the use of symbols; for example, a gift of food—a cake or a casserole—to a newcomer in a neighborhood is a symbol of welcome and friendship. But symbolic communication occurs in a variety of forms, including facial gestures, posture, tone of voice, and other symbolic gestures (such as a handshake or a clenched fist).

Symbols are instrumental in helping people derive meanings from social situations. In social encounters each person's interpretation or definition of a given situation becomes a *subjective reality* from that person's viewpoint. We often assume that what we consider to be “reality” is shared by others; however, this assumption is often incorrect. Subjective reality is acquired and shared through agreed-upon symbols, especially language. If a person shouts “Fire!” in a crowded movie theater, for example, that language produces the same response (attempting to escape) in all of those who hear and understand it. When people in a group do not share the same meaning for a given symbol, however, confusion results; for example, people who did not know the meaning of the word *fire* would not know what the commotion was about. How people *interpret* the messages they receive and the situations they encounter becomes their subjective reality and may strongly influence their behavior.

Symbolic interactionists attempt to study how people make sense of their life situations and the way they go about their activities, in conjunction with others, on a day-to-day basis. How do people develop the capacity to think and act in socially prescribed ways? According to symbolic interactionists,

our thoughts and behavior are shaped by our social interactions with others. Early theorists such as Charles H. Cooley and George Herbert Mead explored how individual personalities are developed from social experience and concluded that we would not have an identity, a “self,” without communication with other people. This idea is developed in Cooley's notion of the “looking-glass self” and Mead's “generalized other,” as discussed in Chapter 4 (“Socialization”). From this perspective the attainment of language is essential not only for the development of a “self” but also for establishing common understandings about social life.

How do symbolic interactionists view social organization and the larger society? According to symbolic interactionists, social organization and society are possible only through people's everyday interactions. In other words, group life takes its shape as people interact with one another (Blumer, 1986/1969). Although macrolevel factors such as economic and political institutions constrain and define the forms of interaction that we have with others, the social world is dynamic and always changing. Chapter 5 (“Society, Social Structure, and Interaction in Everyday Life”) explores two similar approaches—rational choice and exchange theories—that focus specifically on how people rationally try to get what they need by exchanging valued resources with others.



Robert J. Daveant/Shutterstock.com

● Sporting events are a prime location for seeing how college students use symbols to convey shared meanings. The colors of clothing and the display of the school logo emphasize these students' pride in their school.

As we attempt to present ourselves to others in a particular way, we engage in behavior that the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) referred to as “impression management.” Chapter 5 also presents some of Goffman’s ideas, including *dramaturgical analysis*, which envisions that individuals go through their life somewhat like actors performing on a stage, playing out their roles before other people. Symbolic interactionism involves both a theoretical perspective and specific research methods, such as observation, participant observation, and interviews, which focus on individual and small-group behavior (see Chapter 2, “Sociological Research Methods”).

### Applying Symbolic Interactionist Perspectives to Shopping and Consumption

Sociologists applying a symbolic interactionist framework to the study of shopping and consumption would primarily focus on a microlevel analysis of people’s face-to-face interactions and the roles that people play in society. In our efforts to interact with others, we define any situation according to our own subjective reality. This theoretical viewpoint applies to shopping and consumption just as it does to other types of conduct. For example, when a customer goes into a store to make a purchase and offers a credit card to the cashier, what meanings are embedded in the interaction process that takes place between the two of them? The roles that the two people play are based on their histories of interaction in previous situations. They bring to the present encounter symbolically charged ideas, based on previous experiences. Each person also has a certain level of emotional energy available for each interaction. When we are feeling positive, we have a high level of emotional energy, and the opposite is also true. Each time we engage in a new interaction, the situation has to be negotiated all over again, and the outcome cannot be known beforehand.

In the case of a shopper–cashier interaction, how successful will the interaction be for each of them? The answer to this question depends on a kind of social marketplace in which such interactions can either raise or lower one’s emotional energy (Collins, 1987). If the customer’s credit card is rejected, he or she may come away with lower emotional energy. If the customer is angry at the cashier, he or she may attempt to “save face” by reacting in a haughty manner regarding the rejection of the card. (“What’s wrong with you? Can’t you do anything right? I’ll never shop here again!”) If this type of encounter occurs, the cashier may also come out of the interaction with a lower level of emotional energy, which may affect the cashier’s interactions with subsequent customers. Likewise, the next time the customer uses a credit card, he or she may say something like “I hope this card isn’t over its limit;

sometimes I lose track,” even if the person knows that the card’s credit limit has not been exceeded. This is only one of many ways in which the rich tradition of symbolic interactionism might be used to examine shopping and consumption. Other areas of interest might include the social nature of the shopping experience, social interaction patterns in families regarding credit card debts, and why we might spend money to impress others.

### Postmodern Perspectives

According to *postmodern perspectives*, existing theories have been unsuccessful in explaining social life in contemporary societies that are characterized by postindustrialization, consumerism, and global communications. Postmodern social theorists reject the theoretical perspectives we have previously discussed, as well as how those thinkers created the theories (Ritzer, 2011).

Postmodern theories are based on the assumption that the rapid social change that occurs as societies move from modern to postmodern (or postindustrial) conditions has a harmful effect on people. One evident change is the significant decline in the influence of social institutions such as the family, religion, and education on people’s lives. Those who live in postmodern societies typically pursue individual freedom and do not want the structural constraints that are imposed by social institutions. However, the collective ties that once bound people together become weakened, placing people at higher levels of risk.

Postmodern (or “postindustrial”) societies are characterized by an *information explosion* and an economy in which large numbers of people either provide or apply information, or they are employed in professional occupations (such as lawyers and physicians) or service jobs (such as fast-food servers

**macrolevel analysis** an approach that examines whole societies, large-scale social structures, and social systems.

**microlevel analysis** sociological theory and research that focus on small groups rather than on large-scale social structures.

**symbolic interactionist perspectives** the sociological approach that views society as the sum of the interactions of individuals and groups.

**postmodern perspectives** the sociological approach that attempts to explain social life in contemporary societies that are characterized by postindustrialization, consumerism, and global communications.



and health care workers). There is a corresponding *rise of a consumer society* and the emergence of a *global village* in which people around the world instantly communicate with one another.

Jean Baudrillard, a well-known French social theorist, has extensively explored how the shift from production of goods to consumption of information, services, and products in contemporary societies has created a new form of social control. According to Baudrillard's approach, capitalists strive to control people's shopping habits, much like the output of factory workers in industrial economies, to enhance their profits and to keep everyday people from rebelling against social inequality (1998/1970). How does this work? When consumers are encouraged to purchase more than they need or can afford, they often sink deeper in debt and must keep working to meet their monthly payments. Instead of consumption being related to our needs, it is based on factors such as our "wants" and the need we feel to distinguish ourselves from others. We will look at this idea in more detail in the next section, where we apply a postmodern perspective to shopping and consumption. We will also return to Baudrillard's general ideas on postmodern societies in Chapter 3 ("Culture").

Postmodern theory opens up broad new avenues of inquiry by challenging existing perspectives and questioning current belief systems. However, postmodern theory has also been criticized for raising more questions than it answers.

**Applying Postmodern Perspectives to Shopping and Consumption** According to some social theorists, the postmodern society

is a consumer society. The focus of the capitalist economy has shifted from production to consumption: The emphasis is on getting people to consume more and to own a greater variety of things. As previously discussed, credit cards may encourage people to spend more money than they should, and often more than they can afford (Ritzer, 1998). Television shopping networks, online shopping, and mobile advertising and shopping devices make it possible for people to shop around the clock without having to leave home or encounter "real" people. As Ritzer (1998: 121) explains, "So many of our interactions in these settings . . . are simulated, and we become so accustomed to them, that in the end all we have are simulated interactions; there are no more 'real' interactions. The entire distinction between the simulated and the real is lost; simulated interaction is the reality" (see also Baudrillard, 1983).

For postmodernists, social life is not an objective reality waiting for us to discover how it works. Rather, what we experience as social life is actually nothing more or less than how we think about it, and there are many diverse ways of doing that. According to a postmodernist perspective, the Enlightenment goal of intentionally creating a better world out of some knowable truth is an illusion. Although some might choose to dismiss postmodern approaches, they do give us new and important questions to think about regarding the nature of social life.

The Concept Quick Review reviews all four of these perspectives. Throughout this book we will be using these perspectives as lenses through which to view our social world.

## [ concept quick review ]

### The Major Theoretical Perspectives

Perspective	Analysis Level	View of Society
<b>Functionalist</b>	Macrolevel	Society is composed of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability within society. This stability is threatened by dysfunctional acts and institutions.
<b>Conflict</b>	Macrolevel	Society is characterized by social inequality; social life is a struggle for scarce resources. Social arrangements benefit some groups at the expense of others.
<b>Symbolic Interactionist</b>	Microlevel	Society is the sum of the interactions of people and groups. Behavior is learned in interaction with other people; how people define a situation becomes the foundation for how they behave.
<b>Postmodernist</b>	Macrolevel/Microlevel	Societies characterized by postindustrialization, consumerism, and global communications bring into question existing assumptions about social life and the nature of reality.

# chapter REVIEW Q & A

Use these questions and answers to check how well you've achieved the learning objectives set out at the beginning of this chapter.

## **L01** What is sociology, and how can it contribute to our understanding of social life?

Sociology is the systematic study of human society and social interaction. We study sociology to understand how human behavior is shaped by group life and, in turn, how group life is affected by individuals. Our culture tends to emphasize individualism, and sociology pushes us to consider more-complex connections between our personal lives and the larger world.

## **L02** What is meant by the sociological imagination?

According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination helps us understand how seemingly personal troubles, such as suicide, are actually related to larger social forces. It is the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society.

## **L03** How can we develop a global sociological imagination?

We must reach beyond past studies that have focused primarily on the United States to develop a more comprehensive global approach for the future. It is important to have a global sociological imagination because the future of this nation is deeply intertwined with the future of all nations of the world on economic, political, and humanitarian levels.

## **L04** What was the historical context in which sociological thinking developed?

The first systematic analysis of society is found in the philosophies of early Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. The origins of sociological thinking as we know it today can be traced to the scientific revolution in the late seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries and to the Age of Enlightenment. Industrialization and urbanization increased rapidly in the late eighteenth century, and social thinkers began to examine the consequences of these powerful forces.

## **L05** Why were early social thinkers concerned with social order and stability?

Early social thinkers—such as Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim—were interested in analyzing social order and stability, and many of their ideas had a dramatic influence on modern sociology. Auguste Comte coined the term *sociology* to describe a new science that would engage in the study of society. Comte's works were made more accessible for a wide variety of scholars through the efforts of the British sociologist Harriet Martineau. Herbert Spencer's major contribution to sociology was an evolutionary perspective on social order and social change. Durkheim argued that societies are built on social facts, that rapid social change produces strains in society, and that the loss of shared values and purpose can lead to a condition of anomie.

## **L06** Why were many later social thinkers concerned with social change?

In sharp contrast to Durkheim's focus on the stability of society, German economist and philosopher Karl Marx stressed that history is a continuous clash between conflicting ideas and forces. He believed that conflict—especially class conflict—is necessary in order to produce social change and a better society. Although he disagreed with Marx's idea that economics is *the* central force in social change, German social scientist Max Weber acknowledged that economic interests are important in shaping human action.

## **L07** How did industrialization and urbanization influence theorists such as Weber and Simmel?

Weber was concerned about the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the influences these changes had on human behavior. In particular, Weber was concerned that large-scale organizations were becoming increasingly oriented toward routine administration and a specialized division of labor, which he believed were destructive to human vitality and freedom. Whereas other sociologists primarily focused on society as a whole, Simmel explored small social groups and argued that society was best seen as a web of patterned interactions among people.

## **L08** What are key differences in contemporary functionalist and conflict perspectives on social life?

Functionalist perspectives assume that society is a stable, orderly system characterized by societal consensus. Conflict perspectives argue that society is a continuous power struggle among competing groups, often based on class, race, ethnicity, or gender.

## **L09** What are key differences in contemporary symbolic interactionism and postmodernist perspectives on social life?

Interactionist perspectives focus on how people make sense of their everyday social interactions, which are made possible by the use of mutually understood symbols. From an alternative perspective, postmodern theorists believe that entirely new ways of examining social life are needed and that it is time to move beyond functionalist, conflict, and interactionist approaches.

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## questions for **CRITICAL THINKING**

1. What does C. Wright Mills mean when he says the sociological imagination helps us “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society?” (Mills, 1959b: 6). How might this idea be applied to today’s consumer society?
2. As a sociologist, how would you remain objective yet see the world as others see it? Would you make subjective decisions when trying to understand the perspectives of others?
3. Early social thinkers were concerned about stability in times of rapid change. In our more global world, is stability still a primary goal? Or is constant conflict important for the well-being of all humans? Use the conflict and functionalist perspectives to bolster your analysis.
4. Some social analysts believe that college students relate better to commercials and advertising culture than they do to history, literature, or probably anything else (Twitchell, 1996). How would you use the various sociological perspectives to explore the validity of this assertion in regard to students on your college campus?

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