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## → **The Sociology of Sociology**

Now that we have an idea of how sociologists approach their analysis of the world, let's turn that lens, the sociological imagination, to sociology itself. As a formal field, sociology is a relatively young discipline. Numerous fields of inquiry exist, such as molecular genetics, radio astronomy, and computer science, that could not emerge until a certain technology was invented. Sociology might seem to fall outside this category, but to study society, we need not only a curious mind and a certain willingness but also the specific frame of reference—the lens—of the sociological imagination. The sociological imagination is a technology of sorts, a technology that could have developed only during a certain time. That time was, arguably, the nineteenth century, when the French scholar Auguste Comte (1798–1857) invented what he called “social physics” or “positivism.”

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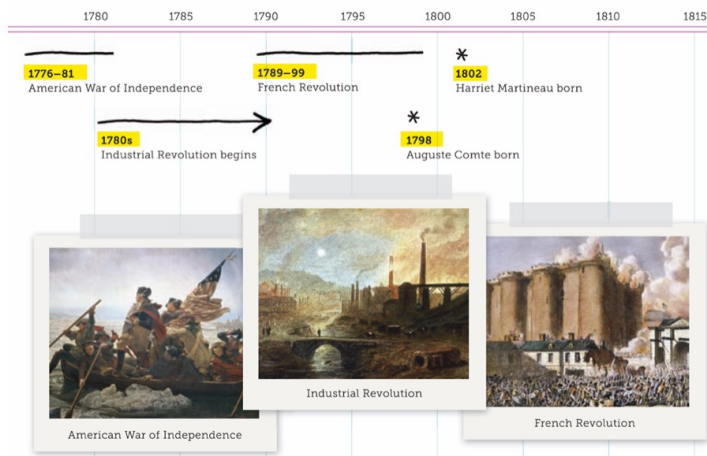
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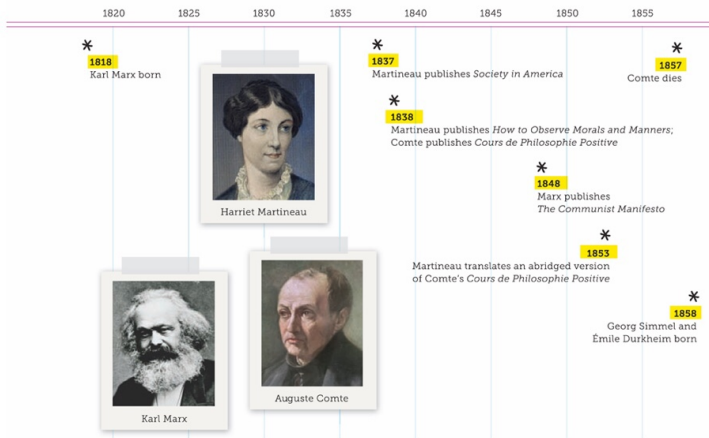
### **Auguste Comte and the Creation of Sociology**

According to Comte, positivism arose out of a need to make moral sense of the social order in a time of declining religious authority. Comte claimed that a secular basis for morality did indeed exist—that is, we could determine right and wrong without reference to higher powers or other religious concepts. And that was the job of the sociologist: to develop a secular morality. Comte further argued that human society had gone through three historical, epistemological stages. In the first, which he referred to as the theological stage, society seemed to be the result of divine will. If you wanted to understand why kings ruled, why Europe used a feudal and guild system of labor, or why colonialism took root, the answer was that it was God's plan. To better understand God's plan and thus comprehend the logic of social life, scholars of the theological period might consult the Bible or other ecclesiastical texts. During stage two, the metaphysical stage according to Comte, Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Hobbes saw humankind's behavior as governed by natural, biological instincts. To understand the nature of society—why things were the way they were—we needed to strip away the

layers of society to better comprehend how our basic drives and natural instincts governed and established the foundation for the surrounding world. Comte called the third and final stage of historical development the scientific stage. In this era, he claimed, we would develop a social physics of sorts in order to identify the scientific laws that govern human behavior. The analogy here is not theology or biology but rather physics. Comte was convinced that we could understand how social institutions worked (and didn't work), how we relate to one another (whether on an individual or group level), and the overall structure of societies if we merely ascertained their "equations" or underlying logic. Needless to say, most sociologists today are not so optimistic.

## TWO CENTURIES OF SOCIOLOGY





1860 \* Jane Addams born

1863 \* George Herbert Mead born

1861-65 American Civil War


1864 \* Max Weber and Charles Cooley born

1867 \* Marx publishes volume one of *Das Kapital*


1868 \* W. E. B. Du Bois born

1869 \* United States completes transcontinental railroad

1876 \* Martineau dies



Jane Addams



American Civil War

1883 \* Marx dies

1889 \* Addams founds Hull House

1893 \* Durkheim publishes *The Division of Labor in Society*

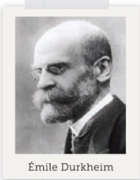
1897 \* Durkheim publishes *Suicide*

1900 \* Simmel publishes *The Philosophy of Money*


1902 \* Talcott Parsons born; Cooley publishes *Human Nature and the Social Order*

1903 \* Du Bois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*

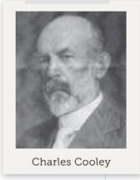
1905 \* Weber publishes "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism"




Emile Durkheim



Georg Simmel



Charles Cooley



W. E. B. Du Bois

1909 \* National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded

1912 \* Durkheim publishes *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

1914 \* Weber publishes *Economy and Society*

1914-18 World War I

1916 \* C. Wright Mills born


1917 \* Durkheim dies

1918 \* Simmel dies


1920 \* Weber dies

1929 \* Cooley dies

1931 \* Mead dies



Max Weber



World War I

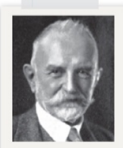


\*  
1934  
Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* is published

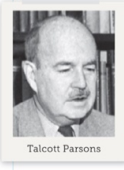
\*  
1935  
Addams dies

1939-45  
World War II

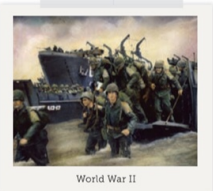
\*  
1937  
Parsons publishes *Structure of Social Action*



George Herbert Mead



Talcott Parsons



World War II



Robert Merton

\*  
1943  
William Foote Whyte publishes *Street Corner Society*

\*  
1951  
Parsons publishes *The Social System*

\*  
1956  
Mills publishes *The Power Elite*

\*  
1957  
Robert Merton publishes *Social Theory and Social Structure*

1960

1965

1970

1975

\*  
1959  
Erving Goffman publishes *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*;  
Mills publishes *The Sociological Imagination*



Erving Goffman

\*  
1962  
Mills dies

\*  
1963  
Du Bois dies; the March on Washington; Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*



C. Wright Mills



March on Washington

\*  
1966  
Equality of Educational Opportunity (the Coleman Report) is published

\*  
1967  
Elliott Liebow publishes *Tally's Corner*; Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan publish *The American Occupational Structure*

\*  
1969  
Woodstock



Ann Oakley

\*  
1972  
Ann Oakley publishes *Sex, Gender, and Society*

\*  
1973  
Daniel Bell publishes *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*

\*  
1977  
Paul Willis publishes *Learning to Labor*

1980

1985

1990

1995

\*  
1978  
William Julius Wilson publishes *The Declining Significance of Race*



William Julius Wilson

\*  
1979  
Parsons dies

\*  
1984  
Pierre Bourdieu publishes *Distinction*; Anthony Giddens publishes *The Constitution of Society*



Anthony Giddens

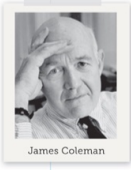
\*  
1991  
James Coleman publishes *Foundations of Social Theory*

\*  
1989  
Arlie Hochschild publishes *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*



Arlie Hochschild

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1993  
Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton publish *American Apartheid*



James Coleman

**Harriet Martineau** Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), an English social theorist, was the first to translate Comte into English. In fact, Comte assigned her translations to his students, claiming that they were better than the original. She also wrote important works of her own, including *Theory and Practice of Society in America* (1837), in which she describes our nation's physical and social aspects. She addressed topics ranging from the way we educate children (which, she attests, affords parents too much control and doesn't ensure quality) to the relationship between the federal and state governments. She was also the author of the first methods book in the area of sociology, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838), in which she took on the institution of marriage, claiming that it was based on an assumption of the inferiority of women. This critique, among other writings, suggests that Martineau should be considered one of the earliest feminist social scientists writing in the English language.

## Classical Sociological Theory

Although Comte and Martineau preceded them, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim are often credited as the founding fathers of the sociological discipline. Some would add a fourth classical sociological theorist, Georg Simmel, to the triumvirate. A brief overview of each of their paradigms follows. We will return to the work of these thinkers throughout the book.

**Karl Marx** Karl Marx (1818–1883) is probably the most famous of the three early sociologists; from his surname the term *Marxism* (an ideological alternative to capitalism) derives, and his writings provided the theoretical basis for Communism. When Marx was a young man, he edited a newspaper that was suppressed by the Prussian government for its radicalism. Forced into exile, Marx settled in London, where he wrote his most important works. Marx was essentially a historian, but he did more than just chronicle events. He elaborated a theory of what drives history, now called historical materialism. Marx believed that it was primarily the conflicts between classes that drove social change throughout history. Marx saw history as an account of man's struggle to gain control of and later dominate his natural environment. However, at a certain point—with the Industrial Revolution and

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the emergence of modern capitalism—the very tools and processes that humans embraced to survive and to manage their surroundings came to dominate humans. Instead of using technology to master the natural world, people became slaves to industrial technology in order to make a living. In Marx’s version of history, each economic system, whether small-scale farming or factory capitalism, had its own fault lines of conflict. In the current epoch, that fault line divided society into a small number of capitalists and a large number of workers (the proletariat) whose interests were opposed. This political struggle, along with escalating crises within the economic system itself, would produce social change through a Communist revolution. In the ensuing Communist society, private property would be abolished and the resulting ideology governing the new economy would be “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (Marx & Engels, 1848/1998). We will explore Marx’s theories in depth in [Chapter 7](#) on social stratification.

**Max Weber** If Marx brought the material world back into history, which had been thought of as mostly idea-driven until then, Max Weber (1864–1920), writing shortly after Marx, is said to have brought ideas back into history. Weber and others believed Marx went too far in seeing culture, ideas, religion, and the like as merely an effect and not a cause of how societies evolve. Specifically, Weber criticized Marx for his exclusive focus on the economy and social class, advocating sociological analysis that allowed for the multiple influences of culture, economics, and politics. Weber is most famous for his two-volume work *Economy and Society* (published posthumously in 1922), as well as a lengthy essay titled “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1904/2003). In the latter, he argued that the religious transformation that occurred during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries laid the groundwork for modern capitalism by upending the medieval ethic of virtuous poverty and replacing it with an ideology that saw riches as a sign of divine providence. *Economy and Society* also provided the theories of authority, rationality, the state (i.e., government), and status and a host of other concepts that

sociologists still use today.

One of Weber's most important contributions was the concept of **Verstehen** ("understanding" in German). By emphasizing *Verstehen*, Weber was suggesting that sociologists approach social behavior from the perspective of those engaging in it. In other words, to truly understand why people act the way they do, a sociologist must understand the meanings people attach to their actions. Weber's emphasis on subjectivity is the foundation of interpretive sociology, the study of social meaning.

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**Émile Durkheim** Across the Rhine in France, the work of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) focused on themes similar to those studied by his German colleagues. He wished to understand how society holds together and how modern capitalism and industrialization have transformed the ways people relate to one another. Durkheim's sociological writing began with *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893/1997). The division of labor refers to the

degree to which jobs are specialized. A society of hunter-gatherers or small-scale farmers has a low division of labor (each household essentially carries out the same tasks to survive); today the United States has a high degree of division of labor, with many highly specialized occupations. What made the substance of Durkheim's work sociology, rather than economics, was the fact that he argued (and substantiated through legal evidence) that the division of labor didn't just affect work and productivity but had social and moral consequences as well. Specifically, the division of labor in a given society helps to determine its form of social solidarity—that is, the way social cohesion among individuals is maintained. Durkheim followed this work with *Suicide* (1897/1951), in which he shows how this individual act is, in reality, conditioned by social forces: the degree to which we are integrated into group life (or not) and the degree to which our lives follow routines. Durkheim argues that one of the main social forces leading to suicide is the sense of normlessness resulting from drastic changes in living conditions or arrangements, which he calls **anomie**. He also wrote about the methods of social science as well as religion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1917/1995). Although the concept originated with Comte, Durkheim is often considered the founding practitioner of **positivist sociology**, a strain within sociology that believes the social world can be described and predicted by certain observable relationships.

**Georg Simmel** Historically, Georg Simmel (1858–1918) has received less credit as one of the founders of sociology, although as of late he is gaining wider recognition. In a series of important lectures and essays, Simmel established what we today refer to as formal sociology—that is, a sociology of pure numbers. For example, among the issues he addressed were the fundamental differences between a group of two and a group of three or more (independent of the reasons for the group or who belongs to it). His work was influential in the development of urban sociology and cultural sociology, and his work with small-group interactions served as an intellectual precedent for later sociologists who came to study microinteractions. He provided formal definitions for small and large groups, a party, a stranger, and the poor. (These are antecedents of network theory, which emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century.)

### **American Sociology**

Throughout the history of sociology, the pendulum has tended to swing back and forth between a focus on big, sweeping theories and on more focused empirical research. The emergence of American sociology was characterized by the latter, applied perspective, and was best embodied by what came to be referred to as the Chicago School, named for many of its proponents' affiliation with the University of Chicago. If the Chicago School had a basic premise, it was that humans' behaviors and personalities are shaped by their social and physical environments, a concept known as social ecology.

Chicago, which had grown from a middle-sized city of 109,260 in 1860 to a major metropolis by the beginning of the twentieth century, when these scholars were writing, served as the main laboratory for the Chicago School's studies. Chicago proved to be fertile ground for studying urbanism and its many discontents. Immigration, race and ethnicity, politics, and family life all became topics of study, primarily through a community-based

approach (i.e., interviewing people and spending time with them). Robert Park (1864–1944), for example, exhorted scholars to “go and get the seat of [their] pants dirty in real research.” This was a time of rapid growth in urban America thanks to a high rate of foreign immigration as well as the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. The researchers of the Chicago School were concerned with how race and ethnic divisions played out in cities: how Polish peasants and African American sharecroppers adapted to life in a new, industrialized world, or how the anonymity of the city itself contributed to creativity and freedom on the one hand, and to the breakdown of traditional communities and higher rates of social problems on the other. For example, in the classic Chicago School essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938), Louis Wirth—himself an immigrant from a small village in Germany—described how the city broke down traditional forms of social solidarity while promoting tolerance, rationality (which led to scientific advances), and individual freedom. Much of the work was what would be called cultural sociology today. For example, in their studies of ethnicity, Park and others challenged the notion inherited from Europe that ethnicity was about bloodlines and instead showed ethnicity “in practice” to be more about the maintenance of cultural practices passed down through generations. Likewise, the stages of immigrant assimilation into American society (contact, then competition,

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and finally assimilation), which are today regarded as common knowledge and indeed part of our national ideology, were first described by Park.

If there was a theoretical paradigm that undergirded much of the research of the Chicago School, it would be the theory of the “social self ” that emerged from the work of the social psychologists Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Taking up the theme, manifest in the Chicago School’s community studies, of how the social environment shapes the individual, Cooley and Mead incorporated some of the key ideas of the pragmatist school of philosophy (which argues that inquiry and truth cannot be understood outside their environment—i.e., that environment affects meaning). Cooley, who taught at the University of Michigan, is best known for the concept of the “looking-glass self.” He argued that the self emerges from an interactive social process. We envision how others perceive us; then we gauge the responses of other individuals to our presentation of self. By refining our vision of how others perceive us, we develop a self-concept that is in constant interaction with the surrounding social world. Much of Cooley’s work described the important role that group dynamics played in this process. (See [Chapter 5](#) on groups and networks.)

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In his classic *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), George Herbert Mead, a social psychologist and philosopher at the University of Chicago, described how the “self ” itself (i.e., the perception of consciousness as an object) develops over the course of childhood as the individual learns to take the point of view of specific others in specific contexts (such as games) and eventually internalizes what Mead calls the “generalized other”—our view of the views of society as a whole that transcends individuals or particular situations. (Mead’s theories are discussed in depth in [Chapter 4](#) on socialization.) Key to

both Cooley's and Mead's work is the notion that it is through social interaction that meaning emerges. This theoretical paradigm is perhaps best summarized by another Chicago scholar, W. I. Thomas, who stated that "if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). This was an important precursor to the notion of the social construction of reality.

**W. E. B. Du Bois** However, even as the Chicago School questioned essentialist notions of race and ethnicity (and even the self), the community of scholars was still dominated by white men. The most important black sociologist of the time, and the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) failed to gain the renown he deserved. The first sociologist to undertake ethnography in the African American community, Du Bois made manifold contributions to scholarship and social causes.



He developed the concept of **double consciousness**, a mechanism by which African Americans constantly maintain two behavioral scripts. The first is the script that any American would have for moving through the world; the second is the script that takes the external opinions of an often racially prejudiced onlooker into consideration. The double consciousness is a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (1903, p. 2). Without a double consciousness, a person shopping for groceries moves through the store trying to remember everything on the list, maybe taste-testing the grapes, impatiently scolding children begging for the latest sugary treat, or snacking on some cookies before paying for them at the register. With a double consciousness, an African American shopping for groceries is aware that he or she might be watched carefully by store security and makes an effort to get in and out quickly. He or she does not linger in back corners out of the gaze of shopkeepers and remembers not to reach into a pocket lest this motion be perceived as evidence of shoplifting. Snacking on a bag of chips before reaching the register or sampling a tasty morsel from the bulk bins is totally out of the question. Those operating with a double consciousness risk conforming so closely to others’ perceptions that they are fully constrained to the behaviors predicted of them. Du Bois was also interested in criminology, using Durkheim’s theory of anomie to explain crime rates among African Americans. Specifically, Du Bois theorized that the breakdown of norms resulting from the sudden and newfound freedom of former slaves caused high crime rates among blacks (at least in the South). He also analyzed the social stratification among Philadelphia’s black population and argued that such class inequality was necessary for progress in the black community. African Americans, he argued, would be led by what he coined “the talented tenth,” an elite of highly educated professionals. In addition to being a major academic sociologist, Du Bois worked to advance a civil rights agenda in the United States. To this end, he co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

**Jane Addams** Among sociologists, women, much like African Americans, didn't always receive the respect they deserved. For example, Jane Addams (1860–1935) was considered a marginal member of the Chicago School, yet many of the movement's thinkers drew some of their insights from her applied work. Addams founded the first American settlement house, Hull House, an institution that attempted to link the ideas of the university to the poor through a full-service community center, staffed by students and professionals, which offered educational services and aid and promoted sports and the arts. It was at Hull House in Chicago that the ideas of the Chicago School were put into practice and tested. Although many of Addams's observations and experiences at Hull House were influential in the development of the Chicago School's theories and Addams herself was a prolific author on both the substance and methodology of community studies, she was regarded as a social worker by the majority of her contemporaries. This label, which she rejected, partly resulted from the applied nature of her work, but undoubtedly gender also played a role in her marginalization: Many of the men of the Chicago School also engaged in social activism yet retained their academic prestige.

### **Modern Sociological Theories**

Although it was born in a tradition of community studies that avoided grand theory and drew its insights from the careful observation of people in their environments, American sociology was largely characterized by the concept of **functionalism** for much of the twentieth century. Drawing on the ideas of Durkheim and best embodied by the work of Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), functionalism derived its name from the notion that the best way to analyze society was to identify the roles that different aspects or phenomena play. These functions may be manifest (explicit) or latent (hidden). This lens is really just an extension of a nineteenth-century theory called *organicism*, the notion that society is like a living organism, each part of which serves an important role in keeping society together. The state or government was seen to be the brain; industry was the muscular system; media and mass communications were the nervous system; and so on.



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## → Divisions within Sociology

Even if sociologists tend to leverage comparisons of some sort, significant fault lines still persist within sociology. Often, the major division is perceived to exist between those who deal in numbers (statistical or quantitative researchers) and those who deal in words (qualitative sociologists). Another split exists between theorists and empiricists. These are false dichotomies, however; they merely act as shorthand for deeper intellectual divisions for which they are poor proxies. A much more significant cleavage exists between interpretive and positivist sociology. Positivist sociology is born from the mission of Comte—that mission being to reveal the “social facts” (to use the term Durkheim later coined) that affect, if not govern, social life. It is akin to uncovering the laws of “social physics,” although most sociologists today would shun Comte’s phrase because it implies an overly deterministic sense of unwavering, time-transcendent laws.

To this end, the standard practice is to form a theory about how the social world works—for instance, that members of minorities have a high degree of group solidarity. The next task is to generate a hypothesis that derives from this theory, perhaps that minority groups should demonstrate a lower level of intragroup violence than majority groups. Next, we make predictions based on our hypotheses. Both the hypotheses and predictions have to be falsifiable by an empirical, or experimental, test; in this case, it might involve examining homicide rates among different groups in a given society or in multiple societies. And last comes the acceptance or rejection of the hypothesis and the revision (or extension) of the theory (in the face of contradictory or confirming evidence). These scientific methods are the same as in any basic science. For that reason, positivism is often called the “normal science” model of sociology.

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Normal science stands in contrast to interpretive sociology, which is much more concerned with the meaning of social phenomena to individuals (remember Weber's *Verstehen*). Rather than make a prediction about homicide rates, the interpretive sociologist will likely seek to understand the experience of solidarity among minority groups in various contexts. An interpretive sociologist might object to the notion that we can make worthwhile predictions about human behavior—or more precisely, might question whether such an endeavor is worth the time and effort. It is a sociology premised on the idea that situation matters so much that the search for social facts that transcend time and place may be futile. Why measure the number of friends we have by the number of people we see face to face every day, given the existence of the Internet and how it has redefined the meaning of social interaction so completely?

### **Microsociology and Macrosociology**

A similar cleavage involves the distinction between *microsociology* and *macrosociology*. **Microsociology** seeks to understand local interactional contexts—for example, why people stare at the numbers in an elevator and are reluctant to make eye contact in this setting. Microsociologists focus on face-to-face encounters and the types of interactions between individuals. They rely on data gathered through participant observations and other qualitative methodologies (for more on these methods, see [Chapter 2](#)).

Macrosociology is generally concerned with social dynamics at a higher level of analysis—across the breadth of a society (or at least a swath of it). A macrosociologist might investigate immigration policy or gender norms or how the educational system interacts with the labor market. Statistical analysis is the most typical manifestation of this kind of research, but by no means the only one. Macrosociologists also use qualitative methods such as historical comparison and in-depth interviewing. They may also resort to large-scale experimentation. That said, a perfect overlap does not exist between methodological divisions and level of analysis. For example, microsociologists might use an experimental method such as varying the context of an elevator to see how people react. Or they might use statistical methods such as conversation analysis, which analyzes turn taking pauses, and other quantifiable aspects of social interaction in localized settings.



## CONCLUSION

The bottom line is that anything goes; as long as you use your sociological imagination, you will be asking important questions and seeking the best way to answer them. As you read the subsequent chapters, keep in mind that a sociologist “makes the familiar strange.” I have divided this book into three parts. The first six chapters introduce the methodological and theoretical tools that you need in order to think like a sociologist. The second part, Chapters 7 through 11, asks you to study the inequalities and differences that divide people in our society. The third part, Chapters 12 through 18, gives you an overview of the social institutions that are the building blocks of our society.