CHAPTER 2

The story of sociology I: understanding modernity

Chapter aims

- To understand the unique character of human beings
- To understand traditional societies and how they differ from modern ones
- To locate the formation of sociology in relation to the development of modernity
- To discuss the key features of the classical sociological theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber

Introduction

The three chapters (Chapters 2, 3 and 18) that deal with the development and character of sociology as a discipline are rather different from the other topic discussions, being best thought of as essential background knowledge and as resources to draw upon as you work through the rest of the book. They provide one sketch of the 'project' of sociology, a way of journeying through the history of thinkers and paradigms that have defined what sociology is about. In following this storyline it is important to remember that the history of sociology tends to get written as the history of *sociological theory*, and this has the effect of somewhat exaggerating the domination of the subject by theory rather than research practice. Sociology is indeed conceptually driven and requires careful and consistent theorising, but it is not just a 'pale' version of philosophy, dealing in ideas for their own sake.

Welcome to the history of the present: sociology as understanding modernity

In the material that follows, we will get a sense of what modern **societies** are, what made them modern, and how they contrast with traditional societies. This will also help us understand why sociology emerged at the time it did and what it takes as its object of study.

Society refers to the organisation of people and groups into a collectivity.

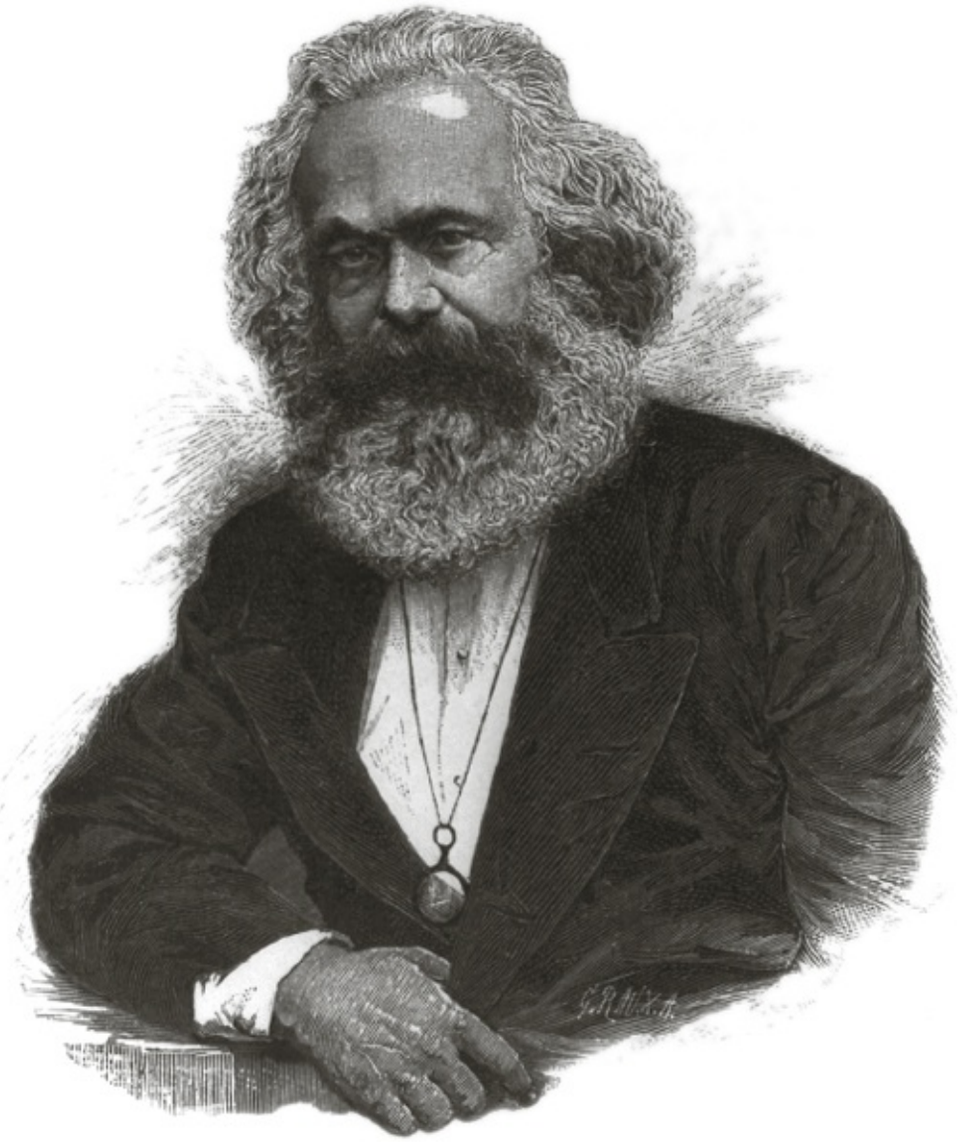
Human uniqueness – change and culture

Following C. Wright Mills (1956, p. 20), we can think about sociology as the 'history of the present'. Sociology typically focuses on group life in modern societies. Mills's phrase records this point, but it also gestures to something else: how unique we are as a species. What it is to be human changes, which is to say that we undergo *historical* as well as *biological* development. There is not a single fixed human society; rather, human society exists in numerous historical forms and each changes across time. Comparing different societies, and examining and explaining them, is a key component of sociological work. When social change is minimal – when people live, work, act and think in essentially the same manner across long time periods, as they do in traditional societies – it is hard to think of society as something that is constructed, that society is made and can be remade. This becomes more obvious in a time of great transition and/or when exposed to groups of people who look different from yourself and the group you belong to, who behave differently and who hold different beliefs.

Mills's idea of sociology as the history of the present drew on a much older idea taken from one of sociology's founders, Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx (1867/1965, p. 174) argued that people think imaginatively about things before they make them a reality and, as such, they make their own history. Although he added an important sociological qualifier: that they seldom do so under circumstances of their own choosing (Marx, 1852/1937, p. 16). You did not pick the era in which you were born, your country of origin, your parents, their wealth or the location in which you grew up. All the same, we stand out. All other animals are limited by the instincts of their particular species. We have culture as well as nature. 'For example, the capacity to reproduce is genetically transmitted, but kinship systems, courtship etiquette and marriage rules are elements of a culture; the capacity to utter noises is genetically transmitted, but languages have to be learnt; so do social and political institutions, agriculture, pottery-making, counting, writing and so on.' (Crone, 2015, p. 94).

The newness of society

To all intents and purposes, we now all live in the modern world. However, in the broad sweep of human history we have not been modern for all that long. This gives us another important way of thinking about sociology as the history of the present: the experiences that are the special domain of our discipline are comparatively new for humans. (This also explains why 'sociology' is a modern word. The credit for coining it usually goes to one of two Frenchmen: Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, who used it in an unpublished work written in 1780; and Auguste Comte, who discussed it in a volume of his work *Positive philosophy* which was published in 1839 (Banford, 1903, p. 146).)



Karl Marx. SOURCE: 3A18737U, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON

Urbanisation and industrialisation

To go back to the beginning: as a species, we are about 200,000 years old. We began moving beyond Africa around 50,000 years ago. Domesticated agriculture began about 11,000 years ago. Rudimentary small-state forms, predicated on grain-based agriculture, started to emerge approximately 5000 years ago. 'More than 97 per cent of human experience, in other words, lies outside the grain-based nation-states in which virtually all of us now live.' (Scott, 2013). 'Before, say, 1500,' James Scott continues, 'most populations had a sporting chance of remaining out of the clutches of states and empires, which were still relatively weak and, given low rates of urbanisation and forest clearance, still had access to foraged foods. On this account, our world of grains and states is a mere blink of the eye (0.25 per cent), in the historical adventure of our species.' Even this 'blink of an eye' figure of 0.25% of all human experience can be further reduced. Urbanisation, which Scott mentions, is a key motif of modernity. While scholars suggest that the first city – Eridu in Sumeria –

can be found in 3700 BC, '[a]s late as 1800, only 3% of the world's populations lived in cities.' (Tharoor, 2016). Today the majority of the world's population are urban dwellers, but we only became an urban planet – one where more than half of the world's population lives in cities – during your lifetime, i.e. during the past 25 years or so. And urbanisation will only intensify. By 2050, two-thirds of the world's population will be living in towns and cities (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), 2014a, p. 7).

Similarly, the modern **nation-state** is only a couple of centuries old, and – if we accept the standard definition of a state as a formally independent territory based on a (written) constitution and ruled in the name of citizens who are regarded as equals – it does not exist in many parts of the world. The majority of the world's states only became formally independent following the break-up of colonial empires after World War II. Most of the trappings of nationhood are also modern, including national cultures themselves (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). It is hard to cohere a national collective without systems of mass education and mass media, neither of which were present until modern times. The oldest continually used national flag belongs to Denmark; it was designed in 1625 and took its current shape in 1748. The UK's Union Jack was adopted in 1801, and New Zealand's flag goes back to 1902. England's 'God Save the Queen' is often regarded as the oldest national anthem, dating back to the mid-1700s. Our 'God Defend New Zealand' was not officially adopted until 1977.

Nation-state is a form of state associated with the modern world in which governments have power over a given territorial space.
Industrial societies are characterised by large-scale production processes in which machine production is dominant, and most of the labour force works in industrial production.
Modernity refers to the modes of social life which emerged in Europe from around 1700 and which have now become more or less global.
Anthropogenic events are caused by human activity; the term 'anthropogenic' is used particularly in relation to environmental issues such as climate change and pollution.

Industry and **industrial society** have been experienced for less than 300 years (the Industrial Revolution began in eighteenth-century Britain). While industrialisation is a highly uneven process, '[m]ost human societies today are either industrial or engaged in the process of industrializing' (Crone, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, the world was transformed with the onset of **modernity**, which sociologists roughly date from 1700 onwards. In the 300 years between the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and the dawn of the current millennium, we have gone from being a planet that was mostly wild to being one that is primarily **anthropogenic** (Ellis et al., 2010). By current estimates there are now seven and a half billion of us, and counting.

We can now add humans to the list of mega-scale processes through their sheer numbers, use of resources, pollution, fragmentation of habitats, introduction of non-native species, spread of pathogens, killing of other species and contributions to climate change. This 'is unique in the history of the Earth: the expansion of an animal species with a population and brain large enough to challenge all competition in the ecosystem' (Kieffer et al., 2009, p. 81).

In 2016, a working group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) recommended announcing an epoch unlike any other: one in which human beings are so dominant that they are exerting a geological influence on the planet and unprecedented stress on its ecosystems (Carrington, 2016). The working group suggested that our present history should officially be labelled the Anthropocene. Almost all of human history since before the dawn of agriculture has taken place in Holocene conditions.

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We are truly in uncharted terrain. Sociology is *the* discipline to help us navigate it. Welcome to the history of the present: this is your time.

Improving the human condition

As a species, we are distinct. Marx's view 'was that humans can produce their social lives in the manner of any species, and can indeed remake themselves – even physically and sensuously, as well as morally and culturally – as they do so' (Carver, 2018). Ultimately, this is what makes sociology a hopeful discipline: the knowledge that there are alternatives and that we can improve the human condition. (For more on the importance of hope, see Rebecca Solnit (2017).) Much of sociology adheres to what Erik Olin Wright (2012) calls 'critical social science': the identification of social institutions and social structures that limit human flourishing. The more exciting sociology practises 'emancipatory social science': working to change these limiting institutions and structures so that human suffering is minimised and the potential for human flourishing is maximised. This is particularly the case with those conducting ecological, feminist, queer, indigenous, post-colonial and socialist sociologies.

Traditional society: understanding pre-industrial life

The experiences of modern humans are massively different from those of most other humans at most other times, 'with the result that most of human history is a closed book to them' (Crone, 2015, p. 1). This can make sociology a challenging discipline. If we are to understand modernity – the condition of being modern, the times we find ourselves in – it is essential to open that book. Indeed, sociologists typically make sense of modern social life by contrasting it with traditional society. Part of thinking about what modern societies are involves thinking about how they differ from most others throughout history.

Having noted the creativity of human beings, and the importance of comparative and historical analysis, we should also note that there is no singular 'traditional society'. For example, there would be an ocean of difference between Ngāi Tahu in Te Waipounamu (the South Island) and the Araucanians in southern Chile during the sixteenth century, and both groups would change their social practices across time. Traditions change because living, thinking, active human beings practise them. All we propose to do in this section is note

some general differences between traditional societies and the modern ones that we inhabit today.

Differences in the pace of change

A starting point of difference is the *pace* of social change. In traditional societies, change is often so slow as to be imperceptible. Under such conditions, social orders can appear 'natural'. People can live in the same place, dress in the same ways, work in the same occupations and hold the same sorts of beliefs for generations. The social differences across two generations in feudal Yorkshire, for example, would not be particularly great. Modern societies, by contrast, are characterised by change. Think about the changes in social life between you and those in your grandparents' generation. Today, the three top-paying jobs in Aotearoa New Zealand as measured by median salaries in job advertisements on Trade Me are information architect (IT), data warehousing and business intelligence (IT), and cybersecurity specialists (Careers New Zealand Mana Rapuara Aotearoa, 2017). These jobs did not exist when those in your grandparents' generation entered the job market. Nor did Trade Me. Nor did the internet. Think about other changes in social life between you and the two generations before you. When they were young, could those people be openly gay or trans? Was same-sex marriage an option for them? Was divorce? Could women work after marriage? If so, in what jobs? Could they afford a house? Did people have the option to undertake tertiary study? What did mental health provision look like? Could children speak Māori at school? Did teachers (and parents) practise corporal punishment? And how did people have a social life before the internet was invented?

While we may rely on public transportation, Uber, e-bikes and internet technologies (we have machines and fossil fuels), those in traditional societies typically relied on humans and animals for their motive power. Again, it is easy to forget how novel this all is in historical terms. Paul Edwards (2003, p. 185) referred to the complex infrastructures that make modern city life in places like Wellington possible as 'the invisible, unremarked basis of modernity itself'. We really do not spend much time thinking about them. Yet John McNeill reminds us that they are unambiguously modern. 'In 1870, *most cities were held together by muscle and bone:* people and horses carried or pulled all the food, water, goods, wastes, and information that circulated. By 1920, cities in the wealthy parts of the world (and a few elsewhere) were immensely complex systems of interlocking technical systems' (McNeill, 2000, p. 290, emphasis added). Infrastructures permitted cities to dig down, rise up and spread out.

Differences in the scale of social life

A related point of difference between traditional societies and modern ones concerns the *scale* of social life. When compared with contemporary society, traditional societies are 'low tech'. Not having industrial-scale technologies, they had low levels of production. Low productivity plus few connections to producers elsewhere meant that markets were small, and hence these societies tended to be marked by scarcity. 'In the pre-capitalist past,' David

Harvey (2014, pp. 124–125) writes, ‘a failure of the grain harvest in Russia would mean local famine and starvation, but there is now a world market in grains that can be drawn upon to compensate for local failure.’

Conditions of scarcity meant that population levels in traditional societies were low. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that a city (London) had a population of over two million. As of the year 2000, greater Tokyo had over 20 million inhabitants (Galka, 2016). According to United Nations projections to 2030, Tokyo will still be the world’s largest city (with a population of over 37 million), followed by Delhi (36 million), Shanghai (30 million) and Mumbai (27 million) (UN DESA, 2014b).

Communication and transportation

Traditional societies also lacked effective means of mass communication and transportation. Napoleon could travel from the River Seine to the River Tiber no faster and no differently than Julius Caesar two millennia before. Both had to rely on horses. A century on, the Paris-to-Rome trip could be completed in 24 hours in a train (Lukacs, 1985, p. 306). Now you can fly it in two hours. An email can make the journey between these capitals in a fraction of a second. Similarly, the high-frequency trading of stocks is now measured in milliseconds. A British settler in nineteenth-century New Zealand would have had to wait months for news from ‘Home’ to arrive by ship. Today, thanks to the likes of Twitter, you can know about distant events, say a storm in Western Samoa or a shooting in the USA, practically in real time. This alerts us to another major theme of modernity, what Marx (1939/1993, p. 524) called the ‘annihilation of space by time’. Communication and transportation revolutions have combined to make the world a significantly smaller place.

Features of traditional societies

Summarising Patricia Crone (2015), we can say that traditional societies are defined by the following features. They:

- are rural and agricultural
- have subsistence economies defined by scarcity
- are on a small scale (typically based on households and regions)
- are low-skilled with simple divisions of labour
- are based on ascribed status/lineage: you are who you are born to
- assert the importance of the group (social roles) over individuals (self-actualisation)
- have politics as an elite-only activity
- have weak states (often their role was just taxation and military service)
- change slowly: traditional societies are stable and coherent.

We can draw out some of the key differences between traditional and modern societies by

referring to the work of Anthony Giddens, summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Traditional society contrasted with modern society

Traditional society	Modern society
References the past: traditional wisdom	Constant scrutiny of the present
Slow-paced social life, limited scope	Fast-paced existence, global scope
Social activity local	Activity disembedded from social environment
Unity of time and space	Separation of time and space
Biggest threats from nature	Threats from modernity
Emphasis on fate	Emphasis on risk

Adapted from: Giddens, A. (1990)

Differences relating to authority

Like most sociologists, Giddens argues that traditional societies anchor themselves in the past. They seek authority in the wisdom of tradition. As such, change comes slowly. Max Weber (1864–1920), another disciplinary founder, similarly argued that the grounds for claiming obedience rested on traditional domination. Reduced to a sentence, the claim is: *obey me because this is what our people have always done* (Parkin, 1982, p. 77). Traditional modes of power still exist in the modern world. Kaumātua, for example, still have traditional authority within (and beyond) Māori communities. But these days the dominant claim to power is what Weber called ‘legal-rational’. Its claim to obedience is very different: *obey me because I am your legally appointed superior*.

Local vs global

As noted previously, traditional societies are small and localised. People live where they work and where they play. (In all likelihood you do not. Your work, friendship, whānau and entertainment networks may span the globe. This is what Giddens means by disembedded social activity.) Giddens also says that time and space are unified in traditional societies. Given the deference to the past and the value placed on doing things as they have always been done in these societies, the past, present and future are unified. Traditional societies, then, display what Georges Gurvitch (1964) called ‘enduring time’.

External vs internal threats

The biggest threats that traditional societies faced were typically external or non-social.

Here Giddens is meaning things like bad weather that would destroy harvests and lead to widespread hunger. This contrasts with the modern world, where the biggest threats are internal – which is to say that they are of our own making. We might think of nuclear weapons and industrial pollution as prime examples here. Even 'external' threats that appear natural are often the result of 'our conscious intrusion into our own history and our interventions into nature' (Giddens, 1994, p. 78). Think of ocean acidification and global warming.

Fate vs risk

Finally, Giddens says that traditional societies tend to explain events such as famines in terms of *fate*. They use religious cosmologies to make sense of the world. In the modern world, by contrast, discourses of *risk* are prominent. While this particular interpretation may be contentious, the arguments it rests on are less so: we typically give more weight to explanations that invoke social and natural causes rather than supernatural ones. In our world, science carries more authority than any other type of knowledge.

A closer look at modernity

Sociology came into being as an intellectual response to the rapidly changing social world of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Europe. In many ways, the basic features of that world are still with us today, and the label customarily given to the whole period from that time until round about now is *modernity*. So a simple way of thinking about sociology is that we focus on group life in modern societies.

But what is meant by 'modernity'? The great French poet Charles Baudelaire famously summed up modernity as:

> a way of living and of experiencing life which has arisen with the changes wrought by industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation; its characteristics are disintegration and reformation, fragmentation and rapid change, ephemerality and insecurity. It involves certain new understandings of time and space: speed, mobility, communication, travel, dynamism, chaos and cultural revolution. (Quoted in Childs, 2016, p. 15)

Features and onset of modernity

Roughly speaking, modernity means the kind of society that is:

- secular rather than religious
- capitalist, rather than feudal or slave-based, or socialist in economic structure
- industrial rather than pre-industrial
- based on the nation-state form of rule
- dynamically mobile rather than 'static'

- individualistic rather than based on traditional tribes or castes
- urban rather than rural
- democratic in political ideology
- a mass society, in terms of access to basic goods and rights.

The onset of modernity can usefully be viewed in terms of three revolutions:

- the Industrial Revolution (1780–1840) = socio-economic revolution
- the French Revolution (1789–1804) = political revolution
- the Enlightenment (1730s–1800) = cultural revolution.

The Industrial Revolution

Many sociologists would say that it was the Industrial Revolution that most profoundly introduced the typical social structure of modern societies, and that the impact of the new factories, capitalist markets and urbanisation cannot be underestimated. According to Jared Diamond (1997), there have been only two truly notable things in the history of humanity. The first was the domestication of plants and animals, which permitted settled agriculture and pastoralism, and led to greater food production. The production of surpluses freed some from the land, paving the way for new divisions of labour and the growth of cities. Appropriation and control of surpluses by elites also led to the emergence of social stratification and rudimentary state forms. The second notable thing was industrialisation, which, as discussed above, marks the onset of modern economic life. ‘To modernise is to industrialise’ (Kumar, 1988, p. 4). Industrialisation broke humanity’s dependence on organic resources, enabled massive increases in economic output, created new levels of wealth (albeit unevenly distributed: class has been called sociology’s first discovery) and facilitated the growth of cities. Such is its significance that the great historian Eric Hobsbawm (1969, p. 13) said of the Industrial Revolution that it ‘marks the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents’. And yet for many years this momentous episode had a very narrow basis in just one industry (cotton manufacturing) in just one part (Lancashire) of just one country (England). But soon the imagery and the reality of the new urban industrial capitalist landscape of factories, mills, mines and closely packed tenement housing came to spread rapidly and to dominate people’s lives and thoughts. The new social environment of early capitalist industry was dynamic but squalid; threatening yet lucrative.

Dunedin was an important centre of industrial production during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here is the Reid and Gray agricultural implement factory.
SOURCE: S13-313D, HOCKEN COLLECTIONS, DUNEDIN

Enlightenment and the French Revolution

Socio-economic revolution, however, could probably not have happened without the 'help' of the other two revolutionary processes. The cultural revolution known as the European Enlightenment, prior to industrialisation, had rapidly altered people's mindsets, and without this intellectual reorientation the notable entrepreneurial and 'rational' attitudes of the new capitalist industrialists might not have developed. Similarly – from where we are now – it is almost impossible to imagine a typical framework for modern capitalist and democratic development outside the liberal democratic ideologies that emerged during the French Revolution. The French Revolution is often seen as inventing modern political life. Immanuel Wallerstein (2000, p. 457) said that two radical new ideas were normalised by it: (1) that political change is not exceptional – it is normal; and (2) that sovereignty does not rest with a monarch (a king or queen) or with the legislature (parliament) – instead, sovereignty resides in the people. Thus the enduring legacy of the French Revolution is the

emergence of ‘the people’ onto the stage of world history. The French Revolution demanded ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ – a demand that has inspired freedom movements the world over.

That revolution brought about another path-breaking role model: the first modern *nation-state*. Nowadays we take the nation-state for granted in so many ways – we even probably think of society itself as coterminous with our nation-states or ‘countries’. But, as noted, nation-states, like capitalism and industrialism, are relative newcomers in historical terms, and their arrival first in Europe and then around the world was partly due to the impact of the French Revolution in creating the first modern nation.

Forming a modern nation-state

In order to assert centralised control and perform the functions of a modern nation-state (for example extract taxes, enforce military service and supress challenges to the state’s legitimacy), states must render their citizens ‘legible’. They do this by a number of means, including land and population surveys, the insistence on enduring surnames, standardised weights and measures, and the implementation of a single official language. Surveillance emerges here as a major modern theme, although there are additional reasons for state practices like the regulation of measurements, such as greater facilitation of market exchanges and trade across distances. These processes can take time, and they can face resistance. In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, for example, fully one-half of all French adults still spoke a native language other than French (E. Weber, quoted in Scott, 1998, p. 374).

Another way of thinking about nation-state formation and the project of legibility is as an act of *homogenisation* – the making of a shared value system to create cultural integration. ‘Culturally, modernity breeds integration by prising loose the masses from their local communities, getting them together in the same factories and the same cities, subjecting them to the same schooling in the same language from early childhood to late adolescence, bombarding them via the same mass media, and putting an end to the isolation of the communities from which they came.’ (Crone, 2015, p. 207).

The Enlightenment inheritance

The cultural revolution known as the Enlightenment, notes Peter Hamilton:

> is one of the starting points for modern sociology. Its central themes formed the threshold of modern thinking about society and the realm of the social. Perhaps of equal importance is that it signalled the appearance of the secular intellectual within Western society, a figure whose role is intimately bound up with the analysis and critique of society. It is from this role that emerged, amongst other intellectual positions, the modern conception of the professional sociologist, based in a specific institution. (1992, p. 57)

The Enlightenment as a social movement

This revolution was a quintessentially ‘idealist’ phenomenon; that is, it was believed that the right sort of ideas – especially those of reason, science and progress – could produce a more rational and free society. As sociologists, though, we should see the Enlightenment not only as a set of ideas but also as a social movement. The second half of the eighteenth century in Europe was a period during which a new and hugely enlarged ‘public sphere’ of learning, discussion and ‘applied’ thinking began to emerge; when salons and coffee houses, libraries and journals, academies, Royal Societies, newspapers and public lectures suddenly thrived, breaking through the old system in which the production and dissemination of ideas had depended on the sponsorship of individual aristocrats. In that context, educated people became excited by, committed to, and organised into the new scientific possibilities of the age – remedies for plagues and diseases, improvements to agricultural methods, inventions of industrial machines for the production of new wealth, and systematic accounts of the development of society itself.

Knowledge produced human progress, it was believed, and knowledge itself could not progress without a wholesale re-examination of (mainly religiously inspired) received authority. In the sentiments of the great Scottish philosopher David Hume, whatever could not be demonstrated by either pure logic or empirical demonstration should be ‘committed to the flames’. In this spirit, many people felt that intellectual and moral liberation was being achieved very rapidly – often at the expense of religious and parochial authority – after centuries of ‘darkness’. The basis for authority would be grounded in reason rather than tradition, ushering in a new future-orientation (thinking about *what could be* as opposed to *what always had been*). Social thinking would become more serious and systematic.

Contradictions within Enlightenment

While forming a very powerful cluster of ideas, the Enlightenment world-view contained some contradictory elements that are worth noting, for in many ways these intellectual and moral tensions are still at the forefront of debate in social philosophy today.

Rationalism and empiricism

Rationalism is a top-down theory of how human knowledge occurs. It holds that our previous prejudices and self-interests can be ‘corrected’ if we rigorously put them under the microscope of pure reason. In terms of social theory, the rationalist view would be that we can aspire to an ‘objective’ account of what the core structures of any society are at a given time, and how society has developed as a whole over time.

Empiricism, by contrast, is the view that nothing can be established by reason alone, and that careful empirical observation can often surprise and offend our sense of reason as well as refute some ingrained beliefs. Science, then, including the science of society, is not so much about the speculations of theorists; rather, it is the painstaking accumulation of facts and observations.

In a nutshell, rationalism says: ‘Work it out!’ while empiricism says: ‘Look and see.’

Universalism and relativism

The Enlighteners were extremely broad-minded, given their time and class background. They were remarkably unwilling to take anything for granted in their study of human society. The Enlightenment thus represents the first modern movement to express a *relativistic* impulse: social interaction and values, it was thought, must be understood as relative to the particular circumstances and cultures of the society under investigation. At the same time, Enlightenment thinkers certainly also believed that their own worldview, expressing as it did a powerful faith in reason, science and progress, was ultimately a *universally* valid programme for all of humanity.

The West and the rest

The 'place' of the Enlightenment was Europe; and its writers, while they tried valiantly to comprehend other cultures on an 'equal' basis, nevertheless prided themselves on the level of civilisation that was achievable in the West. They clearly believed that although it was no Utopia, the emerging commercial society of Europe was more advanced than the supposedly 'primitive' societies that were increasingly coming to its attention through many so-called voyages of 'discovery'. As the anthropological reports from these explorations (e.g. Captain Cook's) came in, so the exploration and mapping of human society in general was constructed. Inevitably, it was felt that although tribal or 'savage' societies were admirable and 'noble' in many ways, they would eventually have to become like Europe in order to advance and develop. Because intellectual exploration was linked closely to the political and economic process of **colonialism**, there is an underlying assumption of Western superiority in Enlightenment thinking, though this did not always have an overt racist bias as such (Eze, 1997).

Colonialism is the historical process by which Western societies have occupied and exploited other territories and societies.

Men and women

The Enlightenment claimed to speak for all humanity, and one of its catch-phrases came from the poet Alexander Pope: 'the proper study of Mankind is Man'. But of course, to epitomise the Enlightenment in this way is immediately to pose the question of where *women* come into the picture. The answer is that they don't, very much. There were many women involved in the social movement of the Enlightenment, and these women were highly intellectual. But they tended to play roles as the wives and mistresses of the more renowned male thinkers, or acted as the hostesses of the salons where lots of exciting discussions between the men, and sometimes the women, took place.

Rediscovering the role of women

It could well be that male bias has served to obscure or downplay women's prominent role in the Enlightenment, and that there were more women, and more important women thinkers, around and active than male history-writing has allowed for. Certainly, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), for one, has been steadily 'upgraded' over time into a thinker of the highest order, and other women writers and thinkers are being 'rediscovered' all the time. So, it is no longer possible just to assume that women were not at the forefront of intellectual activity.

Head vs heart

Yet, Wollstonecraft's remarkable *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792/2001) shows the author being caught between, on the one hand, having to sound as 'rational' as a man in making the case for the extension to women of recently achieved male rights of freedom and equality, and, on the other hand, seeking to appeal 'emotionally' against the injustices that women suffer. Wollstonecraft was also one of the first and most eloquent writers to argue that the very split between rational argument and public life on the one hand, and emotional life and domestic/parenting values on the other, was a divisive and unreasonable one – yet the men of the Enlightenment were as guilty of accepting that split as other men, and indeed, legitimated it all by prizing 'rationality' above everything else. Later, the Romantic reaction against the dominance of rationality in the Enlightenment to some extent challenged this spurious division between head and heart, and between public and personal responsibilities; but the Enlightenment ideology remained powerful, and has only in our own day been seriously contested, largely through the renewed impact of feminist ideas and politics.

The classical period: Marx, Durkheim and Weber

Karl Marx (1818–1883), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Max Weber (1864–1920) all had a great sense of the contradictions of 'progress' and a profound awareness of the waste, oppression and brutality that accompanied the 'progress' represented by the maturing industrial capitalist civilisation in which they lived. According to August Comte (1798–1857), civilisation has 'under every aspect, made constant progress', but this would be an impossible sentiment for Marx, Durkheim or Weber. Nor were these three thinkers simply philosophical speculators. The classical sociologists did, of course, have as their primary goal the need to 'crack', theoretically, the 'code' of modern social development, but they based their big ideas on painstaking research into the state of public health, working conditions, suicide, corporate and economic growth, ancient and modern history, anthropological reports, and so on.

Dimensions in classical sociology

There are four main dimensions of the sociological 'big pictures' constructed by the classical sociological authors, and these allow us to produce some interesting comparisons and contrasts. These (always interrelated) dimensions are:

1. *social change*: the way the theorist understands the development of society over time and in historical context
2. *social structure*: the dissection of the primary social elements at any given time
3. *philosophical underpinnings*: the way in which sociologists justify their work in terms of what they think *knowledge* is (= **epistemology**), and in terms of the fundamental nature of social existence (= **ontology**)
4. The *ideological-political assumptions* or implications of the theories.

Epistemology refers to the methods by which sociologists establish that their knowledge is accurate or 'valid'.
Ontology refers to the propositions we have about 'reality' and the nature of existence.

Karl Marx

Marx saw the development of history as a sequence of **modes of production**. This idea refers to how societies organise the production and reproduction of their material basis, and crucial for Marx is the contention that modes of production are distinguished from one another by the ways in which the economic surplus is generated and 'appropriated'.

Mode of production refers to how societies organise the production and reproduction of their material basis. For Marx, modes of production were distinguished by how they generated and appropriated economic surplus.

Marx argued that **class** inequalities and conflicts between socio-economic classes have characterised all known human history. Every society, barring the most simple traditional societies and the mature communist one to come, has a *ruling class* and a *subject class* with the former parasitic upon the latter. In other words, these classes are crucially connected to the basic social division between the direct producers of economic goods and the (minority) social strata – the dominant or ruling classes – who 'expropriated' for their own class whatever surplus arose. The fact of class division and surplus appropriation is common throughout history, according to Marx, but each of the modes of production generates a specific set of 'relations of production', meaning different types of wealth generation and different legal and social forms for their respective labouring and appropriating classes. Thus, Marx identified an *ancient or slave* mode of production in classical Greece and Rome, where the ruling class directly owned the means of production *and* the human labourers themselves, and where the large-scale slave-based cultivation of the land was central to wealth

production. He also defined a *feudal* mode of production, in which the labour was also primarily land-based but this time on a smaller scale, and in which the labourers were not directly owned by the land-owning ruling class. Rather, the peasants worked the fields for their own subsistence, in addition to which they delivered an obligatory extra amount (whether in kind, or in service, or in money terms) to the feudal lord.

Class was defined by Marx in relation to the ownership of capital. According to Marx, the population could be divided into two main classes: those who owned and controlled the means of production, and those who sold their labour power.

Evolution of modes of production

Marx believed that history was essentially dynamic; that it could not be held 'frozen' according to the rules of any particular mode of production as long as it was based on profound class exploitation. Accordingly, he maintained that there would be tendencies within each mode to gradually intensify technological and social contradictions. He also held that **class consciousness** and the levels of class conflict would intensify, along with social contradictions, until a combination of 'objective' and 'subjective' factors would result in a revolutionary breakthrough into another type of society and mode of production altogether. That is what happened when the ancient civilisations broke down into the period of the Dark Ages, and Western society resurfaced on very different – feudal – socio-economic lines. In turn, Marx argued, feudalism gradually developed its own technological and social contradictions, reaching a point at which capitalism dramatically entered onto the world stage.

Class consciousness refers to awareness of one's 'objective' class situation, especially working-class self-awareness.

Marx's view of capitalism

Applying this general way of understanding history – known as *historical materialism* – to the capitalist society of his own day, Marx defined capitalism as the generalised production of all commodities or goods for sale on the market, including, uniquely, labour power itself. That is, in a capitalist system, workers have to sell their talents and abilities on the open market to employers, who pay cash for the use of that labour power. Notice that we say *labour power* here, not actual labour, because what the capitalist is buying is the *potential* of the labourer to produce a flexible range of output, not always a given fixed amount. And this in turn is related to the capitalist's need to vary the intensity of work according to circumstances, if maximum feasible profit levels are going to be sustained. Those circumstances, Marx saw, crucially included a dynamic of monopoly and competition among

rival capitalist firms. Such competition encouraged the maximum intensification of labour – in factories, mines, etc. – within the available forms of technology, but it also encouraged the introduction of ever-new forms of labour-saving technologies, periodically and cumulatively causing bouts of unemployment and 'restructuring'.

Young women work in the Ross and Glendining clothing factory in Dunedin during the 1940s.

SOURCE: A. MAXWELL AND A. GILLING, PREVENTIVE MEDICINE DISSERTATION, OTAGO UNIVERSITY

Generally, Marx saw capitalism as being governed by strong intrinsic tendencies: the growth of larger and larger conglomerate firms; a higher and higher dependence of capital on labour-shedding technology; a more and more massified or under-employed working class; and, more generally, attendant social problems and unrest that was sure to escalate. As for human consciousness and political protest, Marx's argument was that capital itself was nothing other than 'congealed' human labour: the 'dead' result of the workers' 'live' labour, which is, for its part, sold like any other commodity on the open market. Marx believed that this state of affairs represented a generalised and growing process of **alienation** for the working class: an alienation of workers from the product of their own labour, from the creative process of labour itself, from fellow workers, and indeed from the inherent potential within the human species to find creative expression and fulfilment in work. The products of the labour process under capitalism, Marx argued, become reified or thing-like, taking on a life of their own as disembodied commodities trading in the capitalist marketplace.

Alienation is a process through which workers lose control over their labour and the products of that labour.

Even so, Marx depicted capitalism as a socio-economic system prone to irrational and accentuated swings of boom and bust, contradictions between monopoly and competition, and contradictions between miserable unemployment and the liberating potential of science and knowledge. In these circumstances, he hoped, a consciousness would grow among the ever-broadening working class (proletariat) that it could defend its own interests through collective workplace struggle; and that it then would come to the understanding that the whole mode of production is a contradictory and alienating social totality. The 'subjective' understanding of the proletariat thus comes into line with the 'objective' fact that the problems of capitalism can only be 'solved' by its replacement with a more rational and non-exploitative socio-economic system. This is where Marx envisages a 'revolutionary' change occurring, whether through rapid and violent political action or by means of a more quasi-evolutionary process (Marxists have argued, ever since, about which it is to be).

Theory of historical materialism

Marx, then, developed a powerful theory of historical materialism to explain social change, and he saw the specific social changes of his day constituted not as 'modernity' *per se* but as capitalism. In terms of his analytical framework for analysing any particular society, Marx sought to identify socioeconomic class and class struggle as the key to sociological understanding, themselves underpinned by the thesis that, in any mode of production, there is always a dynamically developing set of contradictions between the social relations of production (class/ownership relations) and the productive forces (the potential of socially applied science and technology). As for his politico-ideological assumptions, it is important to remember that Marx saw himself not as a sociologist but as a revolutionary, convinced of the wastefulness and unfairness of capitalism in human terms and, at the same time, of its inherently transitory nature as a historical phenomenon. Conscious that a state of 'primitive communism' reigned among relatively egalitarian tribal societies (some in the very recent past), he passionately sought to contribute to the creation of an 'advanced' communist society, which accepted the creativity-enhancing powers of modern science but sought to collectively, democratically and non-exploitatively utilise the latter to the benefit and self-fulfilment of all. In line with this 'utopian' motivation for his 'objective' theorising, Marx was an activist in the socialist and trade union movements of his day, advocating support among workers for initiatives that seemed to take things forward, and often vehemently opposing campaigns and ideas that, however well meant, seemed to Marx to be regressive or merely reformist socialist tactics.

A materialist and a realist

In terms of his methodological or philosophical beliefs, Marx could be said to have adhered to a dialectical materialist ontology and a scientific realist epistemology. The first of these labels, *dialectical materialism*, indicates Marx's view that the social world is dynamic and material in character. That is, whereas some previous materialist philosophers saw things as they are in the world as being essentially separate, simple and static, Marx saw them as connected, contradictory and dynamic. Instead of *things*, Marx was interested in *relationships*. However, Marx was a 'materialist' and not an 'idealist' – he felt that although reality was an ongoing process and not a fixed entity, he saw that process as still being very much to do with real, concrete existences in the social world, which itself had to be seen as a part of the wider physical universe. This view sets Marx firmly against previous philosophers such as Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Although Hegel also held to a dynamic and process-based ontology, in his view everything was ultimately to be conceived as the expression of the development of what he termed the Absolute Idea – that which intellectually and spiritually encompasses everything else.

Turning now to *scientific realism*, in the case of Marx this refers to the view that some kind of 'objective' knowledge of social and natural reality is achievable, and that it can be put to good use in controlling the forces of nature and society that have up to the present proved to be obstacles to human progress. Natural science, for Marx, was not the same as social science. Unlike the former, the latter could not use experiments as its main methodology; social science had instead to develop systematic concepts and use these to heighten and guide the business of observation and evidence-sifting. Marx thought that the 'power of abstraction' was central to uncovering the innermost secrets and structure of concrete reality as lived and experienced. Accordingly, Marx felt that his own theory of capitalism got to the essence of the real dynamic of modern social reality by pointing out its underlying workings and essential principles of operation. Armed with that understanding, we could then better explain and understand innumerable concrete aspects of surface life in capitalist society, and what ultimately governs the activities of most people within it, most of the time.

Deep structures vs surface phenomena

This contrast between the deep structures of social life (often hidden from view) and surface events and phenomena (which often seem most immediate to us as social actors in everyday life) is central to all 'realist' thinking in the social sciences, and it certainly shaped much of Marx's substantive theorising. Marx had a tendency to polemicise against all sorts of ideological illusions, whether in the common view or in academic theory, because he felt that these ideas remained at the level of surface reality only, leaving the deeper reality hidden from view. And to remain superficial in this way, Marx held, was to actually bolster the existing social status quo – capitalism. Thus, for example, he thought that the liberal doctrine of 'equality before the law' was an ideological illusion in this sense, because it mistook a surface appearance of capitalist society (formal rights for everyone, rich or poor) for the deeper reality (capitalism as a systematically exploitative and unequal social system in which the rich exploit the poor).

Émile Durkheim

Comparison with Marx

When it comes to Durkheim and Weber, we are dealing with the generation that established sociology as an academic subject. Marx was more of an activist than an academic; a prophet rather than a scholar pure and simple. By the time Durkheim and Weber had completed their thoughts on modernity, the latter had been thoroughly bedded in as a social and cultural system, whereas Marx was active during a formative rather than a settled period of capitalist modernity. In Durkheim we are dealing with someone who accepts the legitimacy of nation-states and of a world system made up of nation-states; someone for whom social life is a complex series of institutions, each necessarily having its own level of operation and its own valid **norms**. Thus, for example, Durkheim was concerned to legitimate the specific role and values of sociology as a profession; indeed, he felt that the conduct of professional associations served as a model for the political progress of society as a whole. Generally, Durkheim has a more positive sense of the necessity and benefits of modern capitalist society, and while he fervently disliked the kind of rampant individualism that capitalism seemed to have introduced, he felt that society could be reformed without the need for revolution. Marx, of course, would have been rather scathing about this kind of *petit-bourgeois* ethical stance in the face of deeper, more turbulent forces.

Norms are the socially accepted ways of behaving in a given situation.

Durkheim's key notion: division of labour

For Durkheim, the key notion in understanding the logic of social change was not so much class struggle or capitalist development but the more technical idea of the **division of labour**, and the fundamental starting point in this regard is to draw a strong contrast between traditional and modern societies. In traditional – or tribal, or segmental – societies, Durkheim says, a very simple form of the division of labour exists, with specialist roles taking shape within the fundamental family (kin, clan) groups, which themselves are all uniformly structured. Durkheim labels the form of social consciousness, or **social solidarity**, that goes along with a simple social structure and division of labour as 'mechanical'. This is because, in a traditional society, the forms of labour, life and experience are essentially very similar, homogeneous even, right across all groups. People know their roles and places; they are firm in their common allegiances to authority, and in their belief in supernatural forces, deities and totems; and their transference of these roles and worldviews to their children is utterly fixed, automatic and accepted. The 'primitive' division of labour and the form of collective consciousness that goes along with it are, then, 'mechanical' – taken for granted and reproduced unproblematically by all units.

Division of labour involves the division of the production process into specialised tasks. For Durkheim, the division of labour is related to social integration in societies.
Social solidarity refers to the form of social integration in societies.

Mechanical vs organic solidarity

However, such a rigid form of society, in Durkheim's perspective, cannot respond very well to changing conditions in the social and natural environment. It is a static organisational form that quickly confronts serious challenges to its survival in times of scarcity or population growth. These types of gradual evolutionary pressure – and here you can see Durkheim's debt to the social evolutionism of Spencer and Comte (see box) – lead, possibly inevitably, to the development of more 'modern' – that is, more complex and robust – forms of labour and solidarity. Durkheim thus contrasts mechanical solidarity with organic solidarity, emphasising how under an 'advanced' division of labour, more and more specialisms develop and people become at one and the same time more individualised and yet also more interdependent. According to Durkheim, this process of social differentiation – ever-increasing specialisation and individuation – is an intrinsic feature of modern society, and one which in principle produces greater human freedom, knowledge and mutual respect. In principle, therefore, it is a good thing.

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Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) shared a progressivist outlook and developed systematic theories to explain society. Comte developed an 'idealist' rather than a 'materialist' theory around three stages of social development. He argued that the development of the human mind from broad history to our personal lives was governed by a three-phase pattern. There is firstly a 'theological' stage where we seek to understand our world through the power of deities; then a 'metaphysical' stage where knowledge is derived from abstract principles; and then the most desired 'positivist' stage where knowledge is attained through general laws that explain the facts. This type of rational knowledge would enable us to create and sustain the rational society, where action is always taken in accordance with controlled scientific understanding. Spencer developed a theory of the 'elements' of any given society that used the idea of a societal system being divided into sub-systems. And that any society could be analysed according to a division between its regulating (political/military) sub-system, its sustaining (economic) sub-system, and its distributive (social policy) sub-system. Spencer understood society in terms of evolution and thought that the different parts of a society were functionally interrelated and mutually interdependent.

View of social structure

Durkheim's understanding (in contrast to that of Marx) of the key structures of society was that they were not principally materialist. Rather, Durkheim examined social structure in terms of the forms of **collective consciousness**, and ultimately saw social reality as having

morality and religion at its heart. Even when the 'collective effervescence' of ostensibly religious ceremonials seem outdated, he thought, society puts *civic* rituals in their place, thus preserving the fundamental feature of all social bonding, which is to invest some social beliefs and phenomena with a sacred aura and categorise others as essentially profane. So even when Durkheim is looking at the changing forms of the division of labour and the rise of specific occupational groups, he is looking at these in terms of how they reflect deeper-level *symbolic* changes in the moral structure of society and its ability or inability to reach Durkheim's personal ideal: a quasi-religious sense of social integration together with the encouragement of true, responsible individuality.

Collective consciousness is the external normative order which coerces members of a group to behave and think in certain ways.

An idealist and a positivist

Regarding the philosophical underpinnings for Durkheim's work, ontologically he was an idealist, in the sense that for him, moral facts – not material conditions – were more basic or essential to the nature of social life. But, unlike philosophers such as Hegel, Durkheim was a *social idealist* – he believed not in the ideas in individual minds, or in the Absolute Spirit as an asocial abstraction, but rather in the bonding power of collective identity. He felt that all belief systems were really about the power of the social bond. Religions were about society, deep down, and society was essentially religious – even if modern worship took unfamiliar forms, like the worship of science itself, which can be seen as serving as a replacement for established religions.

Epistemologically, Durkheim has been described as a 'positivist', though the exact meaning of this term is much debated in the social sciences. Certainly, Durkheim thought that sociology could be a positive science in its own right, since it dealt with entities and realities (above all 'society' itself) that were beyond the reach of other disciplines such as psychology or human biology. Moreover, the reality of social relations and norms could be 'objectively' perceived, Durkheim thought, through rigorous attention to the collective 'facts' of social life – statistical measures of, for example, suicide or secularisation. Famously, he invited his readers to think of social facts as 'things' – real forces that had a strong 'external' influence on individuals. Durkheim thought that these kinds of social fact had as 'brute' an existence as any other solid reality, and that the first condition of scientific sociology was therefore to accurately observe and understand the distinctive nature of social conditions and how they might change over time.

All of this merits the description of 'positivism', because positivism can be read as a doctrine that gives a special place to the accurate observation of empirical facts in scientific enquiry, and positivism also holds that the scientific method is basically the same right across the very different types of scientific investigation – physics, biology, sociology, and so on. In

fact, like Spencer, Durkheim tends to see society as a *social organism*, evolving progressively if not always smoothly; functioning healthily when everything is well integrated and mutually supportive, but behaving 'pathologically' when those supportive functions are disrupted. Having said that, Durkheim strongly believed that sociology's specific object of enquiry was collective moral phenomena, and these have almost nothing to do with the laws of physics and biology. Moreover, they are not observable as such on the surface of society. In a sense, the 'facts' of suicide told us nothing of sociological importance until Durkheim put his interpretative framework to work on them, a framework that itself could hardly be said to be free from particular values and preferences. So in those ways he was not really a positivist as that label is sometimes understood.

A social reformist

In politics, Durkheim was a social reformist. He was a strong supporter of the French Third Republic (the system of government adopted in France from 1870 to 1940), and thought that through education, socialisation and a rich array of ceremonial rituals, the twin threats to modernity – selfish individualism and revolutionary socialist collectivism – could be avoided. Coping with social 'strain' was partly a matter of liberal tolerance and state-led reforms, but also partly a matter of replacing the older collective allegiances of church and class with new, stable and fulfilling ones. In particular, Durkheim thought that the growth of the occupational cultures and loyalties typical of the professions would provide this new sort of bonding, perhaps in a parallel way to the mediaeval guilds for artisans, apprentices and master craftsmen.

Max Weber

The influence of the form of rationality

Weber saw the development of modern society neither as the progressive, if difficult, march of organic solidarity (Durkheim) nor as class conflict within the capitalist socio-economic system (Marx). Weber certainly felt that capitalism was a powerful material reality, and that it generated important forms of collective consciousness. But what he thought was distinctive about modernity was the particular form of **rationality** that accompanied capitalism, the way of thinking and calculating social life that was typical of the modern era. Weber felt that the 'material' and scientific potential to develop capitalism had existed to some extent in other civilisations, for example China, but the power of the top-heavy administrative bureaucracy in Imperial China, he argued, had stifled the emergence of individual initiative and an entrepreneurial spirit. In early modern Europe, by contrast, the unique appearance of ascetic Protestant sects – primarily Calvinists – served as a springboard for 'capitalistic' business practices and the kind of rational calculation about means and ends that industrial society requires in order to thrive.

Rationality, in the modern world, is characterised by efficiency, calculability and accountability.

A crucial doctrine, Weber thought, was the Calvinist belief that one's place in heaven or hell was already predetermined, and so the individual's fate was directly in God's hands rather than mediated by one's role in any established Church. While one could not affect God's judgement on these matters, the signs of one's fate were thought to be present, to some extent, in the 'good works' and 'industry' one performed in the real world. Calvin believed that commitment to labour was a calling. To find favour with God, one must act ascetically and labour continually. To labour was to serve one's brothers and one's Father. Pastoral advice counselled individuals to always believe oneself chosen; anything less looked like a loss of faith. To be confident of salvation, one should work diligently in the world. Through such measures came the 'certainty of grace'. From this powerful psychological compulsion, constant striving and self-regulation there came about a business-like approach to religion and life. Capitalism, 'the most fateful force in our modern life', emerges from this puritan mindset (Weber, 2003, p. 17).

Bureaucratic rationality vs moral virtue

The establishment of capitalism saw the complete triumph of 'formal' rationality – the kind of thinking that is more about how you get from A to B than whether that route or destination has moral virtue in itself. Efficiency, calculability, accountability – these are the generic social qualities that Weber saw as outstripping their religious context. The whole modern world, Weber thought, was becoming relentlessly and increasingly subject to modes of calculation, specialisation and bureaucratisation, such that the form of rationality was taking on a life of its own, outside all 'content' or specific human values. Bureaucratic rationality – the obsession with efficiency, order and administration – had gradually conquered individualism and religion alike as ethical systems. Indeed, Weber felt that the world was becoming progressively more 'disenchanted' in the face of such rationality: society had lost its sense of spirituality and magic as more and more areas of life had become routinised and monitored for calculability. We face, he thought, the prospect of living within an 'iron cage' of bureaucratic rationality. Ironically, the age of the individual capitalist entrepreneur, having broken free of mediaeval or oriental administrative constraint, had gradually led to another kind of nightmare – the administered, endlessly rule-governed and disenchanted modern society.

A multi-factorial approach

Weber did not have a precise theory of society or social structure in the way that both Marx and Durkheim did. Certainly, he offered his thoughts on the capitalist mentality to counter 'vulgar Marxist' emphasis on the pure economics of capitalist development;

however, rather than producing another ‘master plan’ of explanation, Weber preferred a multi-factorial approach to the study of social life. In other words, he saw capitalism, and modern society generally, as having many important but different dimensions, some of which were material, some cultural. Similarly, he opposed Marxism’s focus on social class as the single most important determinant of people’s position and beliefs. Weber did not reject class altogether, but felt that it had to be supplemented by a range of other things, such as **social status** and people’s political identifications. Weber was always happy to accept, as Marx and Durkheim were not, that social life was very complex; so complex, in fact, that perhaps no definitive picture of its structure or logic could be established. He felt that there were many ways of explaining inequality and power – for example, through various practices of **social closure**. Certainly, capitalists and bourgeois groups exclude workers, but some workers have ways of excluding other workers on grounds of status or perhaps ethnicity, etc. The Weberian sociologist therefore cannot justify favouring any particular way of analysing society or the role of any particular group within it.

Social status is one element of Weber’s understanding of social stratification. Status refers to the relative position of people in a publicly recognised hierarchy of social worth.
Social closure is the means by which groups seek to restrict access to rewards to members of their own group.

Weber’s view of social knowledge, his epistemology, was that we gain insight by constructing ‘ideal type’ concepts, such as capitalism, Protestantism, and so on, and by looking at social reality through the lenses of those interpretative concepts. We use these ideal types for purposes of research and argument, but we cannot, according to Weber, claim that any single ideal type – or any combination of them – uniquely reflects social reality; that reality always escapes any attempt to understand it. Weber was not too worried by this, because he was not a philosophical realist – he did not believe we could ever really know what the deep structure of social reality was like, ‘in itself’. This view of his – that reality exists but that we can never ultimately know what it is like because our concepts help construct our view of it – is sometimes known as ‘neo-Kantian’, after the Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant who held a similar view about our understanding of the physical world of nature.

Sociologists and personal values

Weber believed that sociology could in some sense be value-free, and to an extent ‘scientific’. When actively engaged in their investigations, he thought, sociologists must learn to put their own values to one side in examining problems and in developing ideal types. Yet Weber also allowed a significant place for subjective values; more than any other ‘classical’ theorist, he doubted that society could be depicted as an objective totality waiting to be observed and scientifically theorised. Sociologists could strive to be value-neutral, but their starting points and senses of purpose were very much governed by their value-

orientations and commitments. Social reality itself was quite different from the natural world, Weber held, in that social action is uniquely concerned with the meanings that people give to their situations. Sociology, cannot, as Durkheim seemed to recommend, make progress simply by treating social significance as external to individual actors, as disembodied social facts. On the contrary: for Weber, it is only by accepting that social significance is 'internal' to meaningful action that sociology as an interpretative science can get off the ground at all.

A reflective and pessimistic view

Weber's sociology could be described as more reflective and 'pessimistic' when compared with the more scientific and 'optimistic' Marx and Durkheim (in their different ways). As mentioned before, he envisaged the 'magic' of an enchanted world of spirits and superstitions being gradually squeezed out of social life by the forward march of administrative rationality. And socialism, he felt – far from being an alternative to this – was simply another variant. Weber was attracted to the notion that some kind of 'charismatic' solution to the dead hand of rationalisation might emerge, even though his own theory made it unlikely that this could happen.

Table 2.2: A comparison of classical sociologists

Theorist	Social change	Structure	Epistemology	Ideology/ Politics
Marx	Capitalism	Class	Realism	Revolutionary socialism
Durkheim	Organic solidarity	Collective consciousness	Positivism	Liberal reformism
Weber	Rationalisation	Class + status + party	Neo-Kantianism	Liberal pessimism

Source: Gregor McLennan

Conclusion: the centrality of the classics

In this chapter you have been introduced to the classical proponents of sociological theory. Marx, Weber and Durkheim all produced fascinating 'big stories' about society, focusing on the nature of social change and the social structures that organise social life. They remain highly relevant today.

Relevance of Marx today

For example, Marx's vision of proletarian revolution undoubtedly looks outdated – some would say it has been decisively falsified by history – but his argument that under capitalism the globalisation, centralisation and concentration of capital wealth accelerates seems to have stood the test of time, and his idea that the rich get richer while the poor get (relatively) poorer now seems almost self-evidently true. A 2017 report by Oxfam International showed that the world's eight richest men own as much wealth as the poorest half of the entire planet (Hardoon, 2017). In a situation in which 'masters of the universe' financiers and top shareholding executives in large companies achieve millions of dollars just by way of annual 'bonuses', goods for sale on the Western markets are produced by legions of the global poor, including young children. And even in the 'advanced' nations it often seems as if there are two social worlds rather than one, with glitzy city centres and affluent commuter belts contrasting with 'rustbelts' or 'sink estates' with inhabitants for whom all the major indices of relative levels of income, health and education are negative.

Relevance of Weber today

As for Weber, let us illustrate his continuing significance by recalling the discussion of McDonaldisation (Chapter 1). The originator of this concept, George Ritzer, openly admits that in all essentials, his own account is simply an update of Weber's analysis of the relentless growth of 'rationalization' in modernity (Ritzer, 2008, pp. 457–459). Weber himself concentrated on illustrating this in terms of the bureaucratic aspect of organisations; Ritzer just switches the focus to the fast-food industry. But the same ingredients, so to speak, are present: the constant drive towards *efficiency* achieved through fixed rules and identical behaviour; increased precision with regard to *calculability* – of time spent on different operations, of costs per unit of output/consumption; and greater *predictability* through ensuring system consistency no matter where the organisation is operating; and enhanced *control* through ever 'improved' technologies and automation. And like Weber, Ritzer is interested in how this drive for instrumental rationality itself produces socially irrational outcomes: long lines of traffic at drive-through windows, and the dehumanisation/trivialisation of working life and people's capacities. The smiling, cosy Ronald McDonald figure cannot disguise, in Weberian terms, the underlying 'disenchantment of the world' that is going on, as ordinary interaction appears to lose all serious meaning and significance. This indeed is one possible 'Weberian' reason for the apparent increase in religious or spiritual concern today in many places.

Relevance of Durkheim today

Émile Durkheim was also a great theorist and researcher of religious life, showing how in ritual communal activity, a certain 'collective effervescence' occurs, generating commitment to public norms and effecting societal integration. But generally speaking, in modernity these 'mechanical' forms give way to more consciously interdependent, partitioned and differentiated ways of relating together. Durkheim felt that, on the whole, the rise of

individuality in modernity was a good thing, but it came with a significant risk: namely, that the social solidarity and even collective effervescence that true social individuality might help sustain would be threatened by the growth of privatised, selfish individualism. For Durkheim there was a sense in which the social was 'sacred' and he was well aware that as modernity advanced, more and more 'pathological' or 'anomic' forms of rejecting the power of the social would emerge. This kind of Durkheimian framework is often implicitly present when commentators and politicians worry about the decline of community in contemporary atomised society; about the self-reproducing syndromes of 'social exclusion'; or about the spread of forms of 'anti-social behaviour', whether to do with knife-crime, mass binge-drinking, or relentless disputes between next-door neighbours.

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Having indicated the continuing force of the ideas of some of sociology's 'founders', let us move on to the next stage in the 'story of sociology'.

Study questions

2.1 What do sociologists mean by the term *traditional society*?
2.2 What do sociologists mean by the term *modernity*?
2.3 According to Marx, what is social class and what role does it play in society?
2.4 Outline Durkheim's concept of the *division of labour* and discuss its role in social change.
2.5 What does Weber mean by *rationalisation*? Why was he critical of this force in modern societies?

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